The Study

Transnational labor trading

Labor pioneers, economy, labor, and migration in Filipino-Danish relations

The first batch of Filipino workers in Denmark arrived in the years 1960-1973 and thus prior to the formal institution of ‘labor export’ as a Philippine state policy in 1974. However, some of the Filipino Pioneers, as this generation calls themselves, were already facilitated by labor officials. Tracing their histories complicates and expands the dominant narrative of the emergence of the Philippines as a ‘labor brokering state’.

The Filipino Pioneers

Migration from the Philippines to Denmark has, schematically put, occurred in three major waves. The first arrivals between 1960-1973 – during the so-called ‘guest worker era’ of Europe – called themselves the Filipino Pioneers. This was before the Philippine government formally instituted labor export as a policy, which happened with the adoption of the Labor Code of 1974 under which the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB, today the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, POEA) was set up, but for some of the Filipino Pioneers their recruitment was indeed facilitated by labor officials.

I argue that the Labor Code of 1974 was not the beginning of state-managed labor export in the Philippines; rather it was the institutionalization and systematization of state practices that had been ongoing for decades. Furthermore, preparations and experiments with labor export that specifically led to the adoption of the Labor Code of 1974 predated the boost in demand for Filipino labor in the oil-producing countries in the Middle East – a demand which is often cited as the trigger of state brokered labor export in the Philippines. In fact, until 1976, the OEDB placed more workers in Europe than in the oil-rich Arab countries. Even if the OEDB from 1976 onwards deployed significantly more workers to countries such as Saudi Arabia than to Europe, at the time of preparations and restructuring the Labor Code of 1974, it was to countries such as Denmark that Philippine officials supplied labor. Like other ‘guest workers’ in Europe at the time, the Filipino Pioneers were recruited by the manufacturing industry, but primarily they were hired for service jobs. In the case of Denmark, particularly in Copenhagen and Copenhagen Airport.

The second wave of migration from the Philippines to Denmark followed in a moderate but steady flow from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The post-1973 arrivals were largely employed in the same sector, often the same workplaces, as the Pioneers. Most obtained their residence permits through marriage to Danish citizens or permanent residents, since nearly all other legal options became unavailable with the so-called ‘Immigration stop’ that was adopted in late 1973. The labor offered by the Filipinos was still in demand worldwide, despite multiplying obstacles to legal migration.

The third wave of migrants from the Philippines to Denmark began in the late 1990s. The annual number of Philippine citizens entering Denmark rose remarkably from fewer than 200 to more than 2,000 by 2008. This mirrored a general trend in migration from the Philippines to Europe. Between 1999 and 2006 the official numbers of land-based deployed workers to Europe rose from around 15,000 to almost 60,000.1

Immigration stop and continued migration

In both Denmark and the Philippines, the year 1974 constitutes a monument in migration history. The Philippine government adopted the Labor Code that instituted labor export as a state policy and laid out the organizational foundations for state-brokering of labor migration. The Danish government conversely implemented new restrictions on immigration, from 1979 new work permits to third-country nationals were formally suspended, and so were work permits for relatives of migrants already employed in Denmark. Nonetheless, by the late 1970s, Denmark was still on the list of countries served by the OEDB. The immigration stop in Denmark and in many other European countries at this point in history – ending an era of active guest worker recruitment by private employers as well as states – was never a ‘stop’ but rather a reconfiguration of migration. Thus, Philippine officials remained active in Europe with ‘marketing missions’ of their new product: labor. As for the Philippine workers who kept arriving in Europe, including Denmark, the reconfiguration of migration through legal restrictions but continued recruitment rendered their laboring lives still more precarious.

... they “created the perfect distraction from confronting problems in the domestic economy”.

Reconstructing the archive

The Filipino Pioneers migrated through a combination of individual initiative, targeted job postings, networks of local agents, systematic recruitment efforts of international hotel chains, chain migration dynamics, and facilitation from Philippine labor officials. One illustrative example of this is the group who became known as ‘The 49ers’. These 49 women were recruited directly in the Philippines at the request of the management of Hotel Scandicnavia in Copenhagen – built as a joint venture between Scandinavian Airlines and the American-owned hotel chain Western International. The job interview sessions held in Manila were conducted by the HR manager of the Singaporean Shangri La Hotel – who was a former colleague of the American CEO, Mr. Ellis, who had been hired to run the Danish hotel. Some of the 49 women had been recommended for the job interview by relatives already working in Denmark, some had been tipped by local agents in their villages, and some were referred by the OEDB. Minutes from board meetings, records of training programs, reports from labor missions’ of their new hotel chains, chain migration dynamics, and facilitation from Philippine labor officials. One illustrative example of this is the group who became known as ‘The 49ers’. These 49 women were recruited directly in the Philippines at the request of the management of Hotel Scandicnavia in Copenhagen – built as a joint venture between Scandinavian Airlines and the American-owned hotel chain Western International. The job interview sessions held in Manila were conducted by the HR manager of the Singaporean Shangri La Hotel – who was a former colleague of the American CEO, Mr. Ellis, who had been hired to run the Danish hotel. Some of the 49 women had been recommended for the job interview by relatives already working in Denmark, some had been tipped by local agents in their villages, and some were referred by the OEDB. Minutes from board meetings, records of training programs, reports from labor

1. See Nina Trige Andersen, in Filipino-Danish Relations, 1950-2015; his essay is based on my book Labor in Europe than in the oil-rich Arab countries. In both Denmark and the Philippines, the continued migration...
In West Germany the Netherlands, and a Philippine labor attaché in Canada, and countries in Africa and Europe, family, when she went to Denmark as part of followed the migration-for-work tradition of her of Christina Santos Madsen, who later herself maintain the infrastructure of American military camps and bases in Guam, Thailand, and thus the mass deployment of workers from the Philippines to this part of the world was also connected to events outside of domestic Philippine politics, rather than a mere cause or effect of the Labor Code of 1941.

By the summer of 1971, Labor Secretary Ople and his department had worked out an interim set of policies, rules, and regulations for a systematic overseas labor program. This prepared the ground for the first big jump in scale that occurred between 1971 and 1973, when the number of registered contract workers placed abroad went up from a few thousand annually to more than 14,000 in 1972 and more than 36,000 the following year (not counting those who migrated by their own efforts or through private agencies).

Manolo Abella, who worked in the Board of Investments and later Department of Labor in the Kennedy administration, describes Labor Secretary Hernalt as "the one who really saw the larger picture and the looming opportunities" in labor export.10

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Labor as stock, surplus, and export

Prior to the Labor Code of 1979, labor attachés were assigned to locations where Filipinos had for decades been deployed to serve as a labor reserve, and to assist in labor recruitment and the coordination of labor officials who were involved in OEDB

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