

## PHILIPPINE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

### *Statement*

**HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan)** [6.21 pm]: I rise to make a short statement on behalf of the Greens in solidarity with the Philippine trade union movement. Last month, I met with Mr Elmer “Bong” Labog, the chairperson of Kilusang Mayo Uno, the Filipino trade union movement, and the KMU international officer, Ms Meryl Quero-Asa. They were here as part of a delegation being sponsored by Union Aid Abroad–APHEDA to draw to the attention of state Parliaments in Australia, as well as the federal Parliament, what is happening in the Philippines around the violation of human rights for unionists. The Filipino unionists are organising to defend workers’ rights when the Duterte regime is imposing what is an extraordinarily brutal crackdown on union members, officials and leaders. Unfortunately, since the rise to power of President Duterte, more than 43 union members and officials have been killed as a result of extrajudicial violence. They want very much to bring this to the attention of Australian Parliaments in the hope that Australia will put some pressure on the Duterte government to address this diabolical situation.

They call on the Australian government in particular to immediately audit the enhanced defence cooperation program and also to look at any other security arrangements that it may have in conjunction with the Philippines to ensure that it is not inadvertently building the capacity of Filipino security forces to undertake the sort of repression that is currently being exercised against unions and which is contributing to other human rights violations. As I say, the unionists are particularly concerned about the killing and persecution of union members and officials and the climate of fear that this is creating within the Philippines. They are concerned that union leaders and members are being spied upon and also being portrayed as terrorists and being arrested. They are looking for governments to guarantee the security and safety of all union members and leaders and to have the fundamental workers’ rights of the International Labour Organization upheld.

They have asked for the ILO high-level tripartite mission to be able to undertake its investigations in May this year unimpeded by the government. On behalf of the Greens, through this state Parliament—I am sure I will be doing it in conjunction with others—I call on the federal government to please show solidarity with the Filipino trade unions. I am very concerned at the deteriorating human rights situation and I hope that all pressure can be put on the government to ensure that people are no longer living under threat and losing their lives.

### *Statement*

**HON DR SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [6.24 pm]: The visit to Western Australia by the two Filipino unionists was very successful, as attested by tonight’s comments in this Parliament, and I thank Hon Alison Xamon for her remarks just now. The Philippines is a member state of the International Labour Organization, which, as honourable members will know, is the UN agency, as it describes it, for “the world of work”. It is a unique organisation in that it brings together on an equal footing employers, workers and governments. The Philippines has been a member state for a long time—since 1948—and it has had a proud record in the past of contributing to the wellbeing of workers in that country. Indeed, in 2002, the Philippines was the first Asian country to participate in a pilot program on decent work. The decent work agenda being run by the ILO is a fantastic program. It has four basic pillars: rights at work, decent employment opportunities, social protection and social dialogue. It runs on the core values of freedom, equity, security and dignity for all. Those are values to which I think everybody in this Parliament would subscribe. Unfortunately, as the union representatives who visited Western Australia a few weeks ago drew to our attention, in the Philippines at the moment, sadly, many of these rights are being abused, and they are being abused on a daily basis. Ordinary working people in the Philippines are suffering grievously because of the persecution they are facing, solely by virtue of the fact that they are trade union members.

I think that in Australia and Western Australia, we regard freedom of association as one of our core values. I draw the attention of honourable members to an updated report that came out just a few weeks ago, the 2020 “Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations”, which has provided us with an update, an up-to-the-moment snapshot, of exactly what is happening in the Philippines. I will share this with honourable members. They will know that the things we have heard from the two visiting unionists are absolutely a fact of life in the Philippines. This is a very serious issue to which we should all give appropriate attention. The expert committee outlines what it calls new allegations of violence and intimidation. I quote from its most recent report, published only a few weeks ago —

The Committee notes ... with *deep concern* the grave allegations of violence and intimidation of trade unionists communicated by the ITUC and EI, including: (i) assassination of 23 trade union leaders in 2018 and 2019, as well as several attempted assassinations documented by the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights ... (ii) death threats targeting trade union leaders in the education sector in January and February 2019, as well as profiling, surveillance, harassment and red-tagging by the Philippine National Police ... and AFP officials; (iii) violent dispersal of a number of workers’ strikes and protests in Marilao, Bulacan in June and July 2018, resulting in serious injuries, arrests, multiple charges (later dropped) and a week-long

detention; (iv) violent dispersal of a strike by workers of a fruit-exporting company in Compostela Town in Compostela Valley in October 2018 and the murder of a trade union activist; (v) assassination of nine sugar cane workers during a protest at Hacienda Nene in Sagay, Negros Occidental; and (vi) suspected arson attack of a labour leader's home during a strike in a banana-packing plant in December 2018.

These are terrible, terrible actions that are taking place in a country that is one of our close trading partners and, indeed, a country for which many Australians have a deep and abiding affection. I want to pay tribute to the two unionists who visited Western Australia and remark specifically on how successful their visit was and thank them very much for sharing their experiences with us.

*Statement*

**HON MATTHEW SWINBOURN (East Metropolitan)** [6.30 pm]: I would also like to take the opportunity tonight to express my solidarity with the Filipino trade unionists who are currently being persecuted, as has been very well highlighted by Hon Dr Sally Talbot and Hon Alison Xamon. I particularly thank Hon Alison Xamon for making sure that we are all aware of this issue, and for bringing it around. It is very sad to hear that a government would take such punitive action against its own citizens—citizens whose goal is to improve the social and economic wellbeing of working people in the Philippines. When governments take these kinds of actions against their own citizens, those governments are illegitimate. It is not the role of governments to do this. The Philippine government needs to stop and allow trade unionists to do the important work that they have been doing.

It is a small thing that we can do tonight to bring attention to this issue and express our solidarity with it. As a person who has been a lifelong trade unionist and worked with trade unions for 15 years, the thought of my government taking action against me for fighting for workers is a very scary one. I am glad our governments do not do that. However, as Hon Dr Sally Talbot said, not that long ago, the Philippines was a much better example of a supportive environment for those who fight for better conditions.

I would like to also give a callout to a Union Aid Abroad–APHEDA, which has been instrumental in bringing attention to this matter and to providing assistance to other Filipino trade unionists, and also the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, which has also been heavily involved in this and in raising attention and supporting the delegation of the two very brave trade unionists who have been moving around the country and letting people know about this.

The thing that we can do is educate ourselves. We can also call on the federal government to use what powers it has to influence the Filipino government to do the decent and honourable thing and stop killing unionists and workers, and to support them in their activities. Once again, I express my solidarity with those workers.

*Statement*

**HON KYLE MCGINN (Mining and Pastoral)** [6.31 pm]: I, too, rise to show my support for the discussion tonight, commenced by Hon Alison Xamon, and firstly I say thank you to the honourable member for bringing this matter to my attention and giving me the opportunity to meet the two strong unionists in the halls. I was very lucky to have been coming around the corner at that exact time. To see their smiling faces, which were so optimistic, was really inspiring.

Like Hon Matthew Swinbourn, I, too, am a trade unionist, and a very proud one, and have experienced a few things that I thought were tough times as a worker, but we can definitely say that it is a lot tougher in other countries. Countries like Australia have been built off the back of workers. Unions play a critical role in maintaining workforces and ensuring fair pay and conditions. Filipinos are well known within the seafaring industry for being people who are exploited. Remember the ship that was taken from Alcoa in Kwinana and Portland and the crew replaced with Filipino workers. Those Filipino workers were said to be paid \$2 an hour, an absolute disgrace. Companies are exploiting Filipino workers and using them as workforces to take over unionised workplaces, not just in their own country, but around the world. It is disturbing to listen to and look into some of the stuff that the Filipinos are facing at the moment. However, this is not the only time in history that this has happened. I reminisce on trade unionists such as Harry Bridges when he started the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, or ILWU, in 1934 in San Francisco. They took a stand, and there were murders and there was foul play, and a lot of things that the government was doing. I was reading that the government is interfering in negotiations and with police and stuff like that. We had our own government interference in 1998 with the Patrick stevedoring dispute in this country, when the Howard government teamed up with Patrick and kicked out an entire unionised workforce.

We stand in solidarity with these workers in the Philippines. I definitely do. I want to tell some of the information that I have heard about things that have happened just in the last year alone to these strong workers from Kilusang Mayo Uno, or KMU. On 31 October 2019, coordinated police raids saw weapons being planted on the KMU and its affiliates. Children have been held at gunpoint. On that day, 57 people were arrested on false charges of illegal weapon possession, 28 of whom were bus workers who had been attending a meeting for their trade union. Here in this country we have what is called the Australian Building and Construction Commission, or ABCC, which will go out and try to interrogate people and their families to find out what happened at a union meeting and all that sort of stuff. In the Philippines, they plant guns and arrest people. We need to support these countries to

Hon Alison Xamon; Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Matthew Swinbourn; Hon Kyle McGinn; Hon Alanna Clohesy

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ensure that they get up to a better standard and unions are allowed to operate. In the Philippines, 46 union members or officials have been murdered in three years. That is an absolute disgrace. I am very honoured to be able to stand and say a few words in support of all the unions in the Philippines that are going through this, in particular the KMU for standing up and travelling around to share this with the rest of the world. I hope that our federal government takes on board that we cannot just expect to hire exploited workers and not care about the moral principle of why they are being exploited. Too often in this country, we see ourselves buying products and endorsing contracts and free trade agreements with countries that do not have the same standards of safety and do not have the same fair work pay and conditions, and we take advantage of that. The Australian government needs to stop doing that. We need to support countries that are doing the right thing and building from the ground up. I give my support and solidarity to the comrades over in the Philippines, and I hope they get a win over there. Thank you.

*Statement*

**HON ALANNA CLOHESY (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary)** [6.36 pm]: I also rise to acknowledge the recent tour across Australia of the Filipino union leaders as they raised awareness of the victimisation and extrajudicial violence and killings of unionists, church and other civil society leaders under the Duterte government.

There are a lot of reasons why Western Australians, and our Parliament as well, can and should be very concerned about the situation in the Philippines, not the least being that there are approximately 33 000 Western Australians who were born in the Philippines. In addition, Australians are very regular short-stay visitors to the Philippines, and of course Australia and the Philippines are both near neighbours in our south east region. Beyond geography, the circumstances of history have given us an important shared history. A long history of Spanish colonisation means that most Filipinos are Christian, often Catholic. A more recent history of colonisation by the United States has led to high rates of English being spoken among the Filipino population. In 1986, the People Power revolution in the Philippines restored democratic rule. In hindsight, the Philippines led the way for a blossoming of democracy across our region. Within a decade, democratic elections in Indonesia ended autocratic rule in that country.

Of course, there are also differences between Australia and the Philippines. One difference that is quite stark is that although Australia is a comparatively wealthy nation, the Philippines is a comparatively poor and developing nation. When unionists are attacked, as they have been recently in the Philippines, that directly undermines efforts to improve the wages and work safety of working people in the Philippines. Attacks on unions impact on Australia and on other countries as we compete for jobs and economic investment. Even if attacks on unionists elsewhere did not undermine the jobs of Western Australians, I would still stand against it, because attacks on unions and other civil society organisations are morally wrong.

I think it is instructive for us to know a bit about how this situation in the Philippines has come to pass. President Duterte is a populist politician. Part of his platform has been built on the so-called war on drugs. All of us in this place know how harmful illicit drug use can be to the health of people and the wellbeing of their communities. The foundation of the drug trade is organised crime, which, in itself, is a corrupting blight. I understand, and I know many members across this Parliament who also understand, how easy it is for politicians to exploit fear around drug use and abuse. The President has taken a popular desire for a strong emotive response to substance abuse, and encouraged extrajudicial violence and killings among police and paramilitary groups. It is a strongarm tactic that many find popular. It plays to a much earlier and long history of autocratic rule. The rule of law is essential not only in addressing extrajudicial violence, but also to give people faith in their institutions of law and order that administer justice—the police and the courts—which is framed by laws that were passed by a democratically elected Parliament. Without the rule of law, corruption is strengthened and democracy is weakened. Civil society organisations, political parties, a free media, unions, churches, human rights and other groups are an essential part of any democracy, and each are being undermined in the Philippines. Of course, at this distance removed from the Philippines, it is hard to know the extent of the injustices and the crimes, which is why having witnesses to those abuses in Perth and across Australia has been so important. I am proud to say that I am a long-term member of both Union Aid Abroad–APHEDA and the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union, which, together with the Philippines Australian Union Link, PAUL, hosted this important visit. I congratulate them and the delegation for their important work, and offer solidarity for them and their work.