

Tackling gender oppression

Women

workers'

movement in

the Philippines

Women workers in the Philippines have formed a separate organisation, called the KMK. The KMK is affiliated to the progressive trade union federation, the KMU. KAREN HURT* reports.

Asking the question whether women should organise separately frequently elicits fierce debate, argument and emotion within the progressive movement in South Africa, and in many countries throughout the world.

Some people argue that separate structures for women constitutes reverse sexism and divides the struggle, or that separate structures create organisational ghettos for women. Others argue that separate structures will ensure that women build organisational

“Working class women, we believe, have separate problems, and women are suffering from gender oppression. Only by organising women workers separately can women be liberated. Although there are unions, women’s issues are not taken up. KMK makes sure that women’s issues are taken up by the unions.”

- Cloefe Zapanta

strength, skills and leadership which they are unlikely to gain in organisations that are dominated and controlled by men. Separate structures are seen as a forum where women can decide on the issues they want raised in general organisations. They can develop the skills and confidence to make sure that these issues are not only put on the agenda, but discussed and acted on as well.

There are similar debates and arguments about organising women in the progressive movement in the Philippines. But what is very different is

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the strategy that women workers have adopted there. In 1984 they formed a militant women workers' movement, called the Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK). KMK's role is to organise working class women both inside and outside the trade union movement.

The main objectives of KMK are:

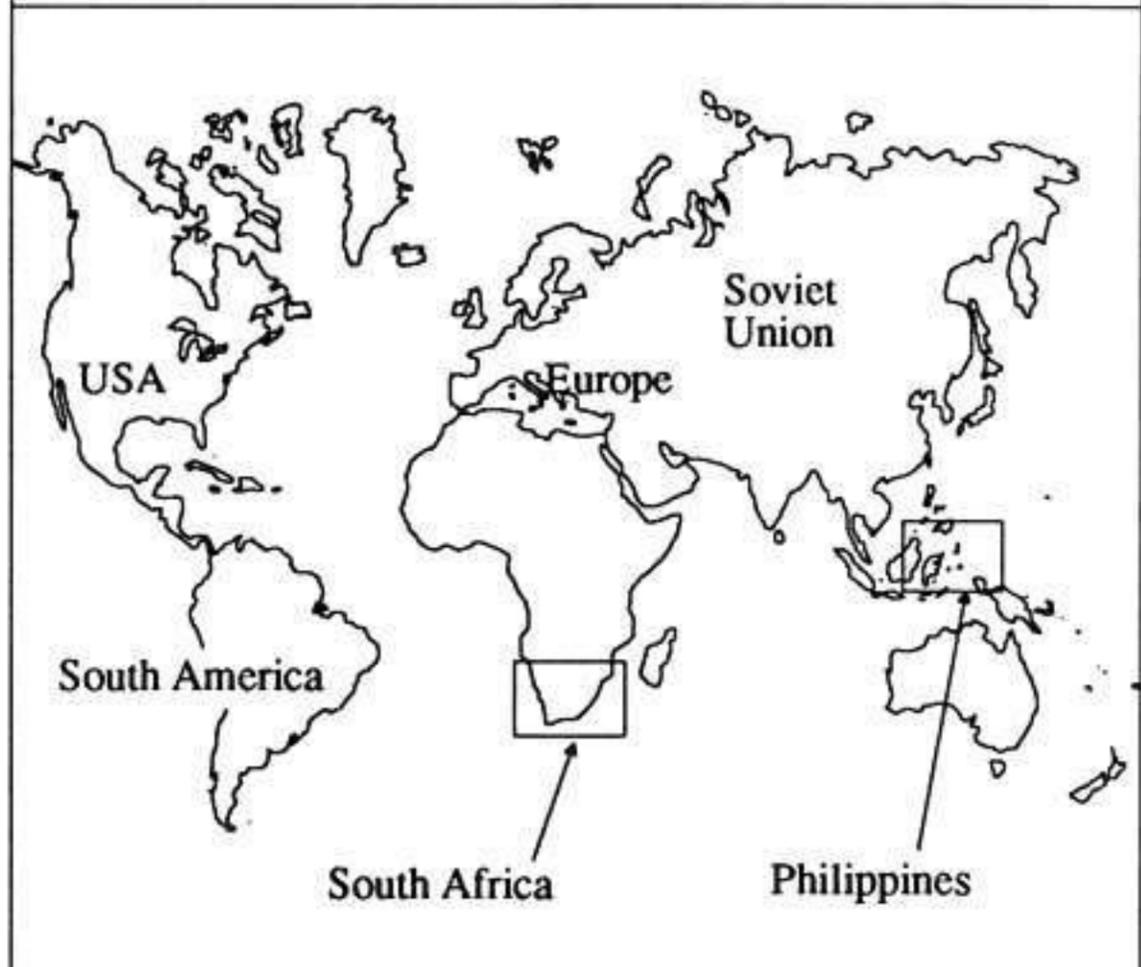
- to eliminate sexual inequality and discrimination against women
- to eradicate all forms of sexual degradation and to promote a non-sexist culture and education
- to guarantee childcare and childbirth rights and benefits
- freedom for women from the double burden through access to social and workplace facilities
- the protection of marital and reproductive rights
- to guarantee full participation of women in decision-making and political actions

KMK is a national women workers' movement, being strongest in Manila, a major city in the Philippines, where there are 20 000 members. It has a national structure which includes a General Assembly composed of all KMK members, a National Council with representatives from each region, an Executive Committee and four committees, namely, Education, Finance, Organising and Campaigns. There are also regional councils and municipal co-ordinating com-

Country profile: the Philippines

The Philippines is a group of islands in south east Asia. It is a country of deep poverty for the majority of the people. It is also a country of struggle, known world-wide for the 'People's Power' revolution in 1986, in which the people of the Philippines won the military over to their side and ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his regime.

The new government under Cory Aquino has not brought about significant improvement in the standard of living for the majority of Filipinos. Most people in the Philippines live below the poverty line. TB and other poverty-related diseases are common. There is one doctor to every 100 000 people. There is a housing shortage, particularly in working class areas. Rents are high. Multinational corporations dominate the economy. ❖



mittees. Through the Campaigns committee, KMK organises rallies and protests around issues concerning women workers, as well as events for International Women's Day and May 1.

The militant trade union federation, Kilusang Mayo

Uno (KMU), known also as the May First Movement, has a membership of 750 000. Like COSATU, KMU takes up political as well as economic issues. Most members of KMK are also members of KMU. ❖



Karen Hurt interviews CLOEFE ZAPANTA, general secretary of KMK

Hurt: *Why do you organise women workers in a separate women workers' movement?*

Cloefe: Workers are one of the leading forces in changing society and the situation in the country generally. But although there are many women members, the trade union leadership is mostly male dominated. KMK sees to it that women workers study issues, through education. We help women to understand the importance of separate women workers' organisations in factories and in communities.

We help women develop different skills through educators training, leadership training, organisers training, public speaking and writing, so that women workers can write their own newsletter. Articles come from women workers. And most are written in Tagalog.

Our priority is women workers' issues, but we do not limit ourselves. For example, we have specific education about US military bases* and their effects, and about economic issues, for example responding to government policies.

Hurt: *What is the relationship between KMK and KMU?*

Cloefe: KMK is an affiliate of KMU. I am National Commissioner on Women's Affairs in KMU. KMK believes their role is to pressurise the unions to take up women's issues more seriously. KMU unions consult with KMK on how to take up women workers' issues with management. KMU now has a Women's Commission which works with us. But it wasn't always like this. The problem was their attitude towards women's issues. Men in unions would joke about women's issues. But then women from KMK made a formal criticism by letter about their attitude, and that made a difference. Now we get men joining our rallies.

We try to involve men workers as well as women, so that they understand women's issues are workers' issues. We talk to union officials and explain the demands. During our first years they didn't feel that it was a priority for trade unions. Now we have made them understand that it is very necessary to take up the

issues of women workers.

We still need time and effort for men to understand that maternity issues are as important as wage issues. Slowly the situation is improving because of our work.

KMK is also a member of Gabriela, which is a broad coalition of women's organisations in the Philippines.

Hurt: *How do you organise women workers?*

Cloefe: Individual women in factories are recruited. We set up a chapter in the factory. You need 10 members to have a chapter. We organise at a regional and national level.

All staff at KMK were at one time workers. Initially we did voluntary work. Then we set up the KMK as a women workers' movement in 1984, during the time of the repressive Marcos regime. Members pay monthly dues. KMK battles financially and we try to get support both locally and internationally. Some of the financial support comes from KMU unions.

Hurt: *Could you talk about some of the experiences of women workers?*

Cloefe: I was a saleslady at a big department store. Workers were not equally treated. There was unequal pay for counter workers and floor workers. We started to

* There are still many US bases in the Philippines, and their removal is a major demand of mass organisations

organise the trade union. We were transferred to different departments to discourage us from organising. We were watched by security guards all the time. We were harassed. But we won our union and bargained for our demands.

Women workers had to wear expensive make-up. We did not earn enough money for this. And if you used less expensive make-up you would get skin problems. We would say to them natural beauty is better. But they said that lipstick is a must. I don't normally wear make-up, so it is humiliating to be told to do so. We felt like we were part of the commodity being sold over the counter.

In Shoe Mart, which is a big chain store, when a woman worker applies for a job she can't wear pants. She must wear a skirt. Some women workers say that when management interviewed them they were asked to raise their skirts. You are not allowed to wear a half-slip because they say maybe the sales clerk is hiding something. After organising the union, we were able to change things.

Women workers get urinary tract infections because they are not allowed to go to the toilet when they need to. The bosses say you are stealing management's time. When you are pregnant you need to go to the toilet more often. The security guards record the time taken at the toilet. The bosses tell you when you can go. The

unions are trying to take up this issue.

It is very hot in the Philippines. Factories are not well-ventilated. In the garment and textile factories, there are ceiling fans, but this is not enough, because it is very hot working there.

The bosses encourage women workers to use contraceptives because they don't want them to fall pregnant. But they don't offer education for women about the different forms of contra-

feeding.

Management doesn't provide safe working conditions for women. We want equal access with men to different types of work. We want maternity leave, parental leave and paternity leave. We want abolition of forced overtime and we want a modification of night shift work. We want management to provide day care centres for workers' children. We also want an end to sexual harassment.



ception. There is discrimination against married women. Bosses specify in the application form that women must be single. They don't want married women because they have children.

The law in social security is that pregnant women should not be fired. But if you get pregnant the bosses 'encourage' you to resign. They do this in a 'nice' way. Some women do give in to pressure, especially women who are not active in the trade union or not educated in their rights as workers and as women. This is part of our education programme, for example, the rights of women during pregnancy and the promotion of breast-

Hurt: *What is the future that you are fighting for in the Philippines?*

Cloefe: For our country, my wish is to have freedom from foreign control, and freedom for the people. Freedom means I want the Philippine people to enjoy the wealth equally distributed so that there is no rich and no poor. A society where our children get a good education and bright future. Housing, education and basic foods for all.

For the women, we want to be equally treated by society. We want equal opportunities to participate in all parts of life, including political decision-making. ☆