



# Foreign workers not 'disposable'

Mass layoffs and a soaring unemployment rate over the past few months have fueled anger and protests by labor groups and unions, who have urged the government to protect domestic labor by reducing the number of foreign workers. **Lorna Kung**, a consultant to the Taiwan International Workers Association, met recently with "Taipei Times" reporter **Shelley Huang** to talk about the plight of migrant workers

BY **SHELLEY HUANG**  
STAFF WRITER

**Taipei Times:** In the past several months the number of people thrown out of work or taking unpaid leave has skyrocketed, prompting many labor associations and even government officials to view cutting foreign labor as a solution to this problem. What are your thoughts on this?

**Lorna Kung (龔允倩):** I think that under poor economic circumstances, foreign workers easily become the scapegoat.

Why are foreign workers always the first people ousted from the labor market? I have always been strongly opposed to this. We should stop and think: "Why foreign workers?" The entire structure of the migrant labor market is built on it being low-priced and easily replaceable; that's why employers want to use foreign labor. But when we don't need them anymore, we think we can dispose of them.

What caused this? It's because foreign workers are prohibited from moving freely in the job market. They can't choose their employers and their wages are cheaper than domestic laborers. Even though they are entitled to the same minimum monthly wage of NT\$17,280, their actual income is lower because the cost of room and board is deducted from their salaries.

The Council of Labor Affairs [CLA] has agreed to let employers deduct NT\$2,500 to NT\$4,500 for room and board. On top of this, they are burdened with high broker fees, both at home and here. All of this makes their actual income much lower. Employers hire foreign workers because they think foreign workers are easier to control. The government, under pressure from businesses, is also willing to let in foreign labor.

We have always promoted the idea of "equal work, equal pay." The debate over whether foreign workers have stolen jobs from domestic workers has continued for more than 20 years, both in Taiwan and in other countries. This issue has caused a rift in a cleavage between foreign and domestic workers.

We believe that neither group is at fault, but that governments and businesses [try to] divide the two groups.

**TT:** What can the government do to solve the unemployment problem without causing laborers to suffer?

**Kung:** The Netherlands, for example, has "working hour reduction." Taiwan has one of the highest average working weeks in the world. So in these times, maybe we could consider making reasonable adjustments to our working hours.



Lorna Kung gestures during an interview with the Taipei Times last month

PHOTO: SHELLEY HUANG, TAIPEI TIMES

The government needs a holistic view of the situation to solve the problem. The solutions they have come up with so far are not the answers.

The way we hire cheap foreign labor not only allows them to be exploited by the system, but also lowers working conditions for domestic laborers. When the economy is good, we let them in, and when the economy is bad, we kick them out. This is very irresponsible. Unions and labor associations should not treat foreign laborers this way, but I know this is a big challenge for society as a whole.



**TT:** Why do you think the Taiwanese environment is harsh to foreign workers?

**Kung:** Many European countries treat foreign laborers with the concept of human rights in mind. I think this is very different from the value systems of many Asian countries. We treat foreign laborers like tools. We don't take care of the workers' families, even though they are part of the entire labor force, but we leave these families to be cared for by the societies of the workers' native countries. We treat them like guest workers and it's impossible for them to become part of our society. This prevents integration, so Taiwanese society has a long way to go.

**TT:** The CLA recently vowed to cut foreign labor in industrial sectors, rather than family caregivers

**“When the economy is good, we let them in, and when the economy is bad, we kick them out. This is very irresponsible.”**

— Lorna Kung, Taiwan International Workers Association consultant

**and household service. What do you think of the different treatment for the two types of foreign laborers?**

**Kung:** I think the root of the problem is that we have yet to expand job opportunities. Right now the government is separating "outsiders" from "insiders." But even the so-called "social welfare foreign workers" [family caregivers] have their own problems; they aren't protected under the Labor Standards Law (勞基法). They get no leave all year-round and have to be on call 24 hours a day.

So which kind of foreign workers should be cut should not be the issue. The first thing that needs to be done is to reduce the huge gap between the labor standards of domestic and foreign workers.

We have recently seen a lot of workers from Vietnam who had to pay US\$6,000, US\$7,000 in broker fees, but after working only two or three months they get laid off. We have discovered that many companies put domestic workers on unpaid leave and continue to hire foreign labor. Why do they

do this? The companies collude with broker agencies to bring in a certain number of foreign workers. In exchange, the companies get to collect part of the broker fees paid by the workers. Government officials know this, of course. There is a lot of money involved between government officials and these agencies.

These workers who have paid high broker fees to get here and are fired after only a short while have only a few options. Those who can't find another employer must either return home, where they face debts from the high broker fees, or run away and become undocumented workers. So, many of them are actually forced to become undocumented.

**TT:** And the undocumented workers are exploited again by employers who want to pay even cheaper wages to illegal workers?

**Kung:** Of course. Some agencies handle this kind of business — for example, in exchange for a job, an undocumented worker would have to pay the agency NT\$5,000,

which is deducted from a monthly salary of NT\$20,000. And they are treated like fugitives. Neighbors can receive cash rewards for reporting an undocumented worker. Police who catch undocumented workers are promoted. Under these circumstances, who can they go to when there is a dispute with their employers?

Not to mention that because they are undocumented they are "out of the system," so they are not protected by the Labor Standards Law. This is very different from other countries. In South Korea, for example, if an undocumented worker is hurt in a car accident, they [the government] will still take care of the worker.

**TT:** About 160,000 foreign workers are working as long-term caregivers. While some experts estimate that as many as 200,000 jobs could be created once the government launches the "long-term care insurance" system for those who need such care (the physically or mentally disabled and the elderly), media reports say the government would give domestic caregivers priority over foreign ones. Your thoughts?

**Kung:** I think that as long as it's the same kind of work, they should receive the same kind of pay.

If the government were willing to train a large number of domestic workers to become long-term caregivers, I think it would be okay. But for families that are currently paying for foreign workers themselves, how are they going to make the transition to hiring domestic workers and having the burden shared by the entire nation, the government? This is an important point.

This transition is also at the root of many debates. Does the funding have to come from insurance? What about tax income? Should we let large corporations take over the market? Should we center it around communities?

Social welfare should be the government's responsibility. These caregivers should not be employed by individual families, but rather by the Taiwanese government.

**TT:** Some lawmakers have said that many companies are putting domestic employees on unpaid leave and giving overtime to foreign workers.

**Kung:** I don't deny it. Employers want migrant workers to work overtime because their wages are cheaper. Workers are also willing to work overtime because they have a lot of debt. But I think we must return to the issue of why workers must be put on unpaid leave in the first place. I don't think unpaid leave should be legal.

Foreign workers also face unpaid leave, but it's hard for many domestic workers to sympathize with them because employers divide the two groups by not giving them equal pay. We have always tried, for the past 10 years or so, to let the country's labor associations see that foreign workers are in the same boat, but I think it will take time and we have a long way to go.

## PIGEON POST

### MECO Taichung has moved

LABOR

The Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) announced last week that its Taichung office, including its Labor and OWWA sections, have relocated into one office in the Cathay Insurance Building. The new address is: MECO-Taichung, Rm 2A 4F, 239 Minchuan Rd, West District, Taichung City. The phone numbers are: MECO-Taichung (04)2302-9080-1; MECO-Labor: (04)2302-9089 and MECO-OWWA: (04)2302-9093. MECO is reminding all Filipinos who wish to participate in next year's general elections that they must register with MECO before Aug. 31. To register for overseas absentee voting, Filipinos must bring with them their passport and one photocopy of the passport data page or a photocopy of the passport data page and their Alien Resident Certificate.

### France honoring TES head

SOCIETY

The Taipei European School (TES) announced that chief executive officer (CEO) John Nixon has been appointed *Chevalier* ("Knight") of the French National Order of Merit (*l'ordre national du Merite*) for his outstanding service in education and his support and contributions to the French community in Taiwan. Nixon will receive the award on March 20 from Patrick Bonneville, director of the French Institute in Taipei. France's *ordre national du Merite* is an order of chivalry founded in December 1963 by then French president Charles de Gaulle and the awards are given by the president. Nixon was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire in 2007 in recognition of his services to education in Taiwan. He has been the CEO for TES since 2000.

### Book sale rescheduled

CHARITY

After being rained out on Saturday, Taipei American School's (TAS) Orphanage Club rescheduled its annual book sale for this Saturday from 10am to 5pm in the lobby and forecourt of the school. Thousands of books will be on offer, from novels, mysteries, biographies and travel books to cookbooks, children's fiction and English-teaching books. Books in Chinese and other languages will also be available, as well as magazines and games. Money raised from the sale will provide funding for orphans and other needy children in Taiwan and abroad. TAS is located at 800 Zhongshan N Rd, Sec 6, in Tianmu (天母).

### TAS Spring Fair coming soon

SOCIETY

TAS' annual PTA Spring Fair will be held on Saturday, March 21, from 10am to 3pm. There will be more than 80 booths and a handful of food stalls catered by five-star hotels and restaurants. There will be live entertainment by several local choirs and dance studios in the Tianmu area, event chairwoman Debbie Chen said. Fairgoers will also have the chance to see a special dance performance by a group of Nantou County elementary students who have been receiving online English language tutoring from several PTA volunteers, she said. The fair will also feature a car show, cultural vendors, a rummage sale, farmer's market, student-run game booths and a grand raffle with more than 200 prizes, Chen said. The fair is open to everyone and admission is NT\$10. For more information, call (02)2873-9900 ext 363 or Debbie at 0926-900-590.

STAFF WRITER



IF YOU HAVE SUGGESTIONS FOR EVENTS, INTERVIEWS OR TOPICS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE COVERED ON THIS PAGE PLEASE SEND YOUR IDEAS TO: [community@taipeitimes.com](mailto:community@taipeitimes.com)

## Democrats Abroad Taiwan seeks to grow between polls

BY **JENNY W. HSU**  
STAFF REPORTER

Democrats Abroad Taiwan is more than just an organization to rally voters for the US Democratic Party, but a place where supporters can express their views and know that their opinion matter, newly elected chairman John Eastwood said.

"We want to hold events that are meaningful and relevant for the members. The [management] committee wants to find out what they view as priorities," he said.

Eastwood, a US attorney who has been in Taiwan for nine years, said Democrats Abroad Taiwan is part of the worldwide group Democrats Abroad, an official arm of the Democratic Party. The Democratic National Committee recognizes Democrats Abroad as a state in terms of convention voting rights.

Democrats Abroad sent 22 delegates, including eight so-called super delegates, to the Democratic National Convention last August in Denver, Colorado. The 22 delegates each had half a vote, bringing the total vote to 11.

Prior to last November's election, Democrats Abroad Taiwan and other Democratic Party supporters

**“We hope the number will keep growing as more and more people get involved.”**

— John Eastwood, Democrats Abroad Taiwan chairman

held several events around Taiwan to raise funds and to encourage all eligible US voters to register to vote and send in their absentee ballots.

Democrats Abroad Taiwan aims to provide a platform where US citizens can discuss and voice opinions on issues that are pertinent to Americans living abroad such as double taxation, visas for families, immigration and Medicare and Medicaid benefits for retirees residing outside of the US, Eastwood said.

The group is also a wealth of knowledge because it is made up of people from diverse backgrounds who are well versed in subjects ranging from politics to filmmaking, he said.

Membership has quintupled in the recent months, said Eastwood, who declined to divulge the exact number, "and we hope the number will keep growing as more and more people get involved."

More than 100 people showed up at the group's inaugural party in Taipei last November. The group also held election-watching events in Taichung and Kaohsiung, which attracted hundreds of people, the first time the group had held such events outside of Taipei, he said. "The [management] committee wants to hear from the members and have them share what's important to them. We want to know how we can best represent the members" Eastwood said, urging members and interested people attend the St. Patrick's Day party at Brass Monkey next Tuesday.

Democrats Abroad Taiwan is open to US citizens aged 18 and above or those who will turn 18 by the next mid-term election. More information is available on [www.democratsabroad.org](http://www.democratsabroad.org) or inquiries can be sent to [democratsabroad-taiwan@gmail.com](mailto:democratsabroad-taiwan@gmail.com).



### ART IMITATES LIFE

Canadian artist Tanya Mahon, right, leads local residents in cleaning up Taichung City streets as part of a piece in her "Litter Twin" action art on March 1.

PHOTO: SU MENG-CHUAN, TAIPEI TIMES