

RISKING LIFE AND LIMB
*IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON ECONOMIC SITUATION OF BPO WORKERS
AND THEIR FAMILIES AND THE NEED FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION*

by BPO Industry Employees Network
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INTRODUCTION

The Philippines tops the Southeast Asian region in the incidence of COVID 19 cases. As of September 15, 2020, there are already over 200,000 COVID-19 cases recorded in many parts of the country, a big chunk of the cases are found in the country's capital region, Metro Manila.

To contain the pandemic, the Philippine government imposed one of the strictest (read: militarized) and longest lockdown beginning March 17 up to May 15, 2020. Although the lockdown (also referred to as enhanced community quarantine, ECQ) was eventually relaxed, many parts of the country remain under general community quarantine (GCQ) where social distancing measures are still in force, and there is still limited public transportation and establishments are operating on a limited capacity.

The pandemic gravely affected the economy and livelihood of working Filipinos and their families. By 2nd quarter of 2020, the Philippines recorded a negative 16% GDP growth rate, and an estimated 10 million Filipinos are reported to have lost their jobs. Unemployment soared to 17.7% in April 2020, during the ECQ. This somehow lowered to 10.0% in July 2020, following the shift towards GCQ. The July 2020 unemployment however is still almost twice as much as last year's unemployment rate of 5.4%.

Meanwhile, social protection, particularly government aid, to poor families and workers who lost their livelihood had been very limited. At the onset of the ECQ, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) implemented COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP) wherein formal sector workers affected by the pandemic are entitled to receive P5,000 as cash aid. A month later, the DOLE closed its application as applicants for the cash assistance outgrew the funds available. Of millions of workers who had been displaced due to the lockdown, the DOLE only targeted a total of 321,975 beneficiaries.¹ By mid-April 2020, the government implemented SBWS or Small Business Wage Subsidy program that targets to provide P5,000 to P8,000 wage subsidy to about 2.6 million workers employed by Micro Small Medium Enterprises (MSME's) or those businesses whose capitalization is between Php 3 million to Php 100 million. BIEN has received reports from BPO workers that they have not been included in CAMP and SBWS because their companies are not considered MSME's.

¹ Christia Marie Ramos (16 April 2020) "DOLE stops accepting CAMP applications as DOF starts wage subsidy program" in *Inquirer.net* website. Retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1259565/dole-stops-accepting-camp-applications-as-dof-starts-wage-subsidy-program>

Apart from the cash aid and wage subsidy to workers, the Philippine government also provided cash aid amounting to P5,000 to P8,000 in two tranches to the poorest Filipino families (roughly 17.7 million families) thru the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) during the ECQ from March to May 2020. Due to changes in the criteria for beneficiaries, the total number of target beneficiaries for the second tranche of SAP was reduced to 8.6 million. Ibon Foundation, an independent research NGO, estimates that a household beneficiary of the first tranche of SAP has received on average Php 5,617. This is equivalent to Php 53 per family or Php12 per person per day from mid-March to end June 2020. While for those who received both the first and the second tranche, a family received on average a total of Php10,664 or Php101 per family or Php23 per family member in the same period.²

The Philippines is the country hardest hit by the pandemic in the whole of Southeast Asia with cases rising to over 300,000 as of writing. Ironically, it is spending much lower compared to its ASEAN neighbors to combat the pandemic. The Philippines is COVID-19 budget is only at \$24.1 billion compared to Indonesia's \$115.78 billion, Singapore's \$92.12 billion, Thailand's \$84.09 billion, Malaysia's \$78.45 billion, and Vietnam's \$26.5 billion. This translates to \$201.11 or about P9,750 per Filipino and this is way lower than per capita spending of the following SEA countries: Singapore largest at \$16,337.50 per person; Malaysia, \$2,488.18; Thailand, \$1,211.20; Brunei, \$741.61; Indonesia, \$432.54 and Vietnam, \$277.40. In terms of gross domestic product (GDP), Philippines has spent only 5.83% of its GDP on COVID response, compared to Cambodia, 8.27%; Indonesia, 10.94%; Malaysia, 22.07%; Singapore, 26.2%; Thailand, 15.96%; Timor-Leste, 8.65%, and Vietnam, 10.12%.³

The lack of a prompt and effective health response to the pandemic and limited aid provided to the poor and affected working families worsened the situation. Many Filipinos find themselves scrambling to alternative sources of income to keep afloat following the restrictions on mobility and closure or slowdown of businesses.

In the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector—considered as one of the country's economic growth driver employing over 1.3 million Filipinos—tens of thousands of BPO workers found themselves jobless following negative impact of the pandemic on foreign clients (i.e., hotels and airlines in the United States). As BPO companies scramble to keep their competitiveness amid the pandemic-induced recession, attacks on BPO workers' right to security of tenure through the practice of floating while hiring, no work - no pay status, forced leave of absence and unjust termination of employees escalated. Meanwhile, BPO workers have also been excluded from most government financial aid during the pandemic. BPO workers are thus forced to choose between health and economic survival during the pandemic period.

Participants and objectives

2 Ibon Foundation (June 30, 2020) "Gov't should check SAP's gross failure as COVID cases rise – IBON" in *Ibon Foundation* website retrieved from <https://www.ibon.org/govt-should-check-saps-gross-failure-as-covid-cases-rise/>

3 De Vera, Ben (26 September 2020) "Bayanihan 2 raises COVID-19 response fund to \$21.45B" in *Inquirer.net* website. Retrieved from <https://business.inquirer.net/308270/bayanihan-2-raises-covid-19-response-fund-to-21-45b>

This report is the result of solidarity-based research on social protection. It compiles selected stories of BPO workers' and their families as they navigate these difficult times. Twenty-four BPO workers who are either single parents or breadwinners and who either lost their jobs or experienced reduced household income because of working from home, participated in the research and received a small internet support of P1,500.00 which they can utilize to augment their limited income or find alternative sources of income. Eighteen participants answered an online interview via Google forms. Six participants were interviewed in-depth via phone or zoom. The selection of participants was through referrals from BIEN members and organizers. This report also uses information from secondary sources (i.e., government data and research institutes).

This report aims to shed light on the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive social protection program during the pandemic. Particularly, the interviews centered on the following issues: 1) The impact of the pandemic on jobs and rights of BPO workers and their families 2) How BPO workers and their families cope with the economic crisis alongside the pandemic, and 3) What are BPO workers' demands during the pandemic and what are their stories of struggle to achieve these demands.

FINDINGS AND WORKERS STORIES

This section will provide a summary of the main points raised by BPO workers in the online and in-depth interviews. This will be followed by four stories of BPO workers or their families, their challenges, and hopes during the pandemic.

Loss of jobs and income for BPO workers and their families

The pandemic negatively affected BPO workers' jobs. Many BPO workers found themselves in no work - no pay status (NWNP) or floating status for a variety of reasons. Some workers are willing to work but end up in NWNP due to lack of transportation and other logistical support to shift to working from home. One BPO worker from Taguig City lamented:

“No transportation was provided to workers who are working on site. Apparently, I had to walk, hitch, and walk again. The company gave no assistance whether financial, emotional, or spiritual. I am in NO WORK - NO PAY from March to June. This left me helpless with anxiety, depression but I still need to be strong to find ways and means to survive...”

More commonly, clients of BPO companies have either downsized or pulled-out due to economic slowdown and BPO companies are cutting down on cost through flexible labour schemes. The precariousness of the situation is so palpable that BPO workers get floated intermittently. One BPO worker from Cavite shared:

“Due to the lockdown, I didn't have work for a few months. It was hard. Recently, I got employed

with another account. We were again put in floating status without an assurance when we are going to be re-profiled to a different account. I was lucky to be re-profiled again, but many of my colleagues are still jobless. And some of them resigned already so that they can find another job that will feed their family”

Support from the government and companies are also limited for displaced BPO workers. Of 24 workers interviewed, at least half of them said that they did not receive any form of cash assistance during the pandemic. Such can be a daunting and hopeless situation for BPO workers especially those who have dependents to feed. One worker based in Manila shared:

“It's really hard, at times, you get sick because you're really stressed out with your current situation; you can't even buy the food you want to eat. Sometimes you're thinking out of a way like selling your kidneys in order to survive during this pandemic period.”

The situation is even more daunting for families whose main provider succumbed to COVID-19 (See Story 4).

Being able to work from home sounds like a fortune nowadays; but with poor internet infrastructure, lack of additional benefits for overhead costs, and unreasonable talk time requirements and performance metrics. Working from home is yet another way to intensify exploitation of BPO workers amid a crisis (See Story 2).

Means of coping during the crisis

To cope with the crisis, BPO workers find themselves applying for all sorts of loans from relatives, friends, and government institutions. Some must rely on the kindness of other people. A female BPO worker from Caloocan shared,

“I was fortunate enough to have an understanding landlord who's been helping us with our daily needs. They shared with us their meals and somehow we were getting some relief goods from the local government.”

Others must stretch the limited savings or relief goods they receive from the government. One BPO worker from Bulacan grieved, “We have to take hunger and pain to the next level and accept the fact that life is not the same as before. ”

For others, they simply must find new jobs and other sources of income to get by.

BPO workers' demands for social protection

To cope with the economic crisis, all interviewed BPO workers said they should be included in the government cash aid programs. Apart from this, adequate and prompt health response and more

stringent policies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace should also be effective by the government so BPO workers can carry on their jobs. A BPO employee from Cebu echoed the need for the government to provide for all its citizens in these trying times.

“I have been in no work - no pay and I don't have any other source of income to provide for the needs of our family. Especially employees like me who are a breadwinner, we should be included in the government social protection programs.”

BPO Workers' Stories

The following stories highlight narratives of BPO workers as they struggle and cope with the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the workers.

Story 1 No place for empathy: Unjust termination, exclusion from aid during the pandemic

Empathy is the one of the most important values a call center worker should exhibit when attending to customer queries or complaints. Call center workers must show the customers that they fully understand what customers are going through for them to be effective in addressing the complaints. Ironically, BPO companies have dealt with workers' rights, particularly the right to security of tenure, with no empathy at all, not even during the pandemic. On the contrary, BPO companies have utilized policies of labour flexibility, by unjustly terminating workers or placing them on floating status.

Sid and Xavier* are both call center workers based in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental, a province in the West Central Philippines. They work in the same company and both have been unjustly terminated during and because of the pandemic.

When the cases of COVID-19 first began to rise in Bacolod City in March, several cases were reported in Sid's community. He was still active when he got a fever and was strongly advised by the doctor to not work on site but instead, work from home. He sought assistance from his company to work from home. However, the company placed him on floating status or “no work - no pay” even if there are available jobs. For Sid, the company has strong preference for on-site workers. But such is a battle between livelihood and life. Sid is worried he might catch the virus if he starts working on site. By June 2020, he received a notice of retrenchment from his company.

Xavier meanwhile accepted to work on-site in April during the lockdown because of lack of work from home options. His company provided hotel accommodation but the room was shared by four individuals. Social distancing was simply impossible. One of his roommates caught a fever and was simply sent home without COVID testing. Two of his teammates eventually got exposed to a suspected COVID case. Fearing for his health and safety, Xavier decided to file a leave of absence. He went back to work when the lockdown was relaxed sometime in May. After five days, he got hypertension and had to take a sick leave but the company did not accept his medical certificate from his doctor. A few days later, his community was placed on localized

lockdown because of rising COVID cases. Because of the lockdown, it was impossible for him to come to work. The company issued him a “return to work order” despite the validity of the lockdown that prevents him from coming to work. After a few more days, Xavier received a notice of termination.

Family crisis

Getting terminated from a job for breadwinners like Sid and Xavier during the pandemic gravely affected their families’ livelihood. Sid is the head of a four-member household. Apart from utilities and daily food allowance, he is also responsible for the school expenses of his two siblings. In addition, he is a committed rescuer of stray dogs and cats. When he was placed on floating status and was eventually retrenched, he and his family were left with no other source of income. Sid lamented:

“Nobody else in our household is bringing food on the table. It is really difficult because we don’t have any other source. It is such a burden and there are times when I feel like I will go crazy. I ended up filing all sorts of loans because that is the only way we can survive.”

Sid was able to acquire a Php12,000 loan from the social security system. He would get food supplies from a community grocery on credit. But he worries that this may not be tenable because his credit is only increasing; it is difficult to sustain a living on loans. “I tried to find other jobs, online and even other industries, but I still haven’t gotten word.”

Likewise, Xavier is the breadwinner of a five-member household. Her sister used to be an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) who went back to the Philippines last year after experiencing abuse from her employer. Because of the pandemic, Xavier’s sister cannot process a new employment contract abroad. As a result, Xavier had to shoulder all the household’s expenses—rent, utilities, and daily food allowance. Out of despair, his sister was forced to take a job in a local grocery store even if the pay is below the minimum wage. And to augment their limited household income, he loaned money from relatives and from friends. Xavier shared:

“One night, I was walking home from a friend’s house. I dared to take a papaya fruit from someone’s else’s backyard so we could cook it for dinner. I think they noticed it because the next day, our neighbor wrapped all the remaining fruits in plastic. It’s a bit funny to think of. But in a way, it is also degrading; I had always been independent but now I feel helpless. It feels like I am asking for alms from people.”

Exclusion from government aid

BPO workers are often misconceived as better-off than in terms of salary and benefits. Crudely speaking, they may earn higher compared to minimum wage earners, but still barely enough to support a decent living. BPO workers typically earn P14,000 to P16,000 monthly basic pay and salaries are lower in provinces like Bacolod. Such amount is way below the family living wage P31,089.00.⁴

Thus, for most BPO workers like Sid and Xavier, receiving government aid to supplement their income is

⁴ Family living wage computation of IBON Foundation for a family of 5 members in Metro Manila as of February 2020. See “The Family Living Wage” (March 7, 2020) in *Ibon Foundation* website <https://www.ibon.org/the-family-living-wage-as-of-february-2020/>

necessary to keep them afloat after they lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Sadly, by excluding BPO workers from financial aid like the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) or COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP), the government likewise showed little empathy for BPO workers. Xavier averred:

“I checked with the village council and they said that to qualify for the social amelioration program (SAP), an individual’s income should not exceed P4,000 monthly. I argued that I actually did not have income because I lost my job, but they said call center agents are excluded from SAP. This is just sheer discrimination. They think that call center agents are earning dollars and we don’t need help.”

If any, Sid and Xavier said that they only received a few kilos of rice, two cans of sardines and a few packs of noodles every two weeks during the lockdown. “The rice they gave out to us was not even edible. It is smelly and yellowish. Even my pet dog won’t even eat it,” Xavier complained.

Sid and Xavier firmly believe that BPO workers should be included in the social protection programs provided by the government during the lockdown. Sid said, “We contributed a lot in our economy. But many of us lost our jobs during the pandemic and have no other source of income. Now that we are facing a lot of hardships, it is just unfair for us to be left behind.”#

Story 2 Working at home is not a vacation

Helen, a 28-year old BPO worker in Bacolod shifted from on-site work to work from home after the lockdown was first imposed in the city, in the beginning of April, 2020.

Work from home is preferable for most BPO workers during the pandemic because call centers proved to be hotspots for the spread of COVID-19. When the lockdown was first imposed in Metro Manila on March 17, the BPO Industry Employees Network (BIEN) demanded that on-site work be suspended and work from home arrangements be set up. However, working from home had its own set of challenges for workers.³

Transitioning to work from home because of the pandemic was abrupt and workers are at the receiving end of the logistical nightmare it entailed. Contrary to government advice that BPO companies should deliver computers to the homes of BPO workers to set up work from home arrangements, some BPO workers had to get the computers from the offices by themselves even if there is no public transportation available during the lockdown period.

Helen and her co-workers for instance had to wait long hours to make sure that they were issued with a computer to be able to WFH. She narrated:

“At first, only those living in Bacolod city were provided with PC’s. It was a hurdle, we lined up and waited hours after our evening shift to wait for the computer to be issued by the company. People were lying down and sleeping all over the waiting area. We did not mind the lack of shift because if you are not able to get a computer, you will be in no work - no pay status It took me until 6PM (after more than 8 hours) to get the computer.”

According to a survey conducted by BIEN in May 2020, 1 out of 2 BPO workers is working from home, but issues of poor internet, longer working hours and absence of support particularly for internet and electricity result in reduced income for workers.⁵

Poor infrastructure and longer work hours

Poor internet infrastructure is a major concern in areas outside Metro Manila. Unlike in highly urbanized centers, Bacolod City looks more like a country-side surrounded by towns whose economy is dependent on agriculture, primarily sugarcane plantations owned by big landlords. But because of the lower wage rates and a large pool of well-educated youth, BPO companies have sprawled in the small city and is home to about 30,000 BPO workers.

BPO workers like Helen who reside in nearby towns of Bacolod, have much limited access to decent internet service. In fact, her household is not subscribed to an internet service. To be able to work from home, she shared the internet connection of her landlady who owns a small computer/internet shop or *piso-net*.⁶⁵ Internet connection can be very weak at times especially during the day which affects her work. She works at night beginning at 11PM but oftentimes, her shift exceeds up until later in morning. And when the computer shop opens, she feels like scrambling for internet bandwidth with the customers.

Companies have also utilized the pandemic and subsequent economic crisis to drive workers to work harder and longer hours. Workers are practically competing to be eligible to work from home. Workers find ways to have a computer if they miss getting one from the company. And if they are issued with a computer, they must make sure that their performance is keeping up with the targets despite the internet connection problems. Otherwise, the computers may be taken back by the companies and they will be sent to work back on site or they are left in no work - no pay status.

Aside from this, BPO companies are very stingy with overhead costs. Helen's company, for instance, provides internet allowance to work from home agents if and only if they are able to meet a certain number of talk time. Talk time is not equivalent to the number of hours an agent is logged in the computer. Instead, talk time is measured by the number of hours a worker is able to receive calls. To get Php 800 (16 USD) worth of internet subsidy each payday, an agent must be able to have a total work hours/talk time of 120 hours per fortnight or roughly every two weeks. This means a 50 percent increase of her regular work hours, or 12 hours of work for five days a week. But because of a poor internet connection and occasional system issues, Helen ends up working 13 hours, 7 days a week in order to meet the target talk time and be qualified for the internet subsidy. The company does not provide electricity subsidies to work from home agents.

Reduced household income

With over 10 million jobs lost in the Philippines since the second quarter of 2020 because of the pandemic,⁷

5 See "BPO Workers Call for Urgent Action: Let us stay at home." retrieved from <http://chnng.it/2xsRd5XRPN> 4 Neil Mercado (June 23, 2020). "Makabayan bloc seeks inquiry on WFH-related issues amid pandemic" in *Inquirer.net* retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1296273/makabayan-bloc-seeks-inquiry-on-workhome-related-issues-amid-pandemic>

6 A "pay as you go" internet shop wherein customers drop 1 peso coin for each 5 minutes of internet surfing via a compute

7 David Tristan Yumol (May 21, 2020) "DOLE estimates 10 million workers will lose jobs this year due to COVID-19 pandemic" in *CNN Philippines*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/5/21/dole-estimates-ten-million-workers-will-lose-jobs-covid-pandemic.html>

having a job is considered a fortune. Helen may have been spared from job loss, but not her entire household. Her partner works as a staff in a landscaping contractor. The lockdown and pandemic left her partner with virtually no income as landscape projects have been postponed, suspended or canceled. As a result, they have to stretch her income which is equivalent to P10,000 every fortnight for the needs of seven individuals – four children, herself, her partner, and her father. “[M]y income is really not enough for our needs especially because my partner is out of work due to the pandemic. We haven’t even paid our utility bills during the lockdown,” Helen explained.

The lack of government support to BPO workers and non-compliance of companies to their lawful obligations aggravate the situation of workers. Helen would have applied for a calamity loan from the social security system (SSS) to get them through the economic difficulty but she cannot because her company has not been paying their SSS contribution since January, 2020. Like other BPO workers, Helen was ineligible to receive government support during the lockdown and pandemic. “I didn’t receive subsidies from the government, not even a dime,” Helen remarked. In fact, even if her father is a senior citizen, who should be included in the SAP beneficiaries, their household was eventually excluded because Helen is a call center agent.

Indeed, the economic impact of the pandemic is affecting the livelihood of working families. Working from home is not a vacation. Neither is it a safeguard against the economic impact of the pandemic. A wider and more inclusive social protection is thus needed so Helen and her family can bounce back from the challenges brought about by the pandemic.#

Story 3 Floating while hiring; Sinking jobs and livelihood during the pandemic

Eunice, 39, is a single mother to a 21-month old child. She is a call center worker in a BPO company based in Eastwood, Quezon City, the first IT-hub in the Philippines.

In late April, Eunice and about 400 more of her colleagues were shocked to receive news from their company that their client, one of the leading airlines in the United States, shall be enforcing a slowdown, a consequence of the pandemic to the airline industry. This meant no work - no pay, in other words, “floating” for Eunice and the rest of her colleagues beginning May 1.

Being placed on “floating” status is a very precarious condition for BPO workers. Workers under floating status are still part of the company but they have no work, and thereby no pay which lasts for up to six months. Current laws in the Philippines allow this practice, but in the call centers companies are placing workers on “floating status” when a client closes down but at the same time, they are continuously hiring new employees for other clients.

Eunice and her co-workers reached out to BIEN for assistance after they were placed on floating or no work - no pay while the company is continuously posting new job vacancies online. To question this unjust and unlawful practice, they circulated a petition calling on the management to immediately transfer workers to other available accounts, provide financial assistance and additional paid leaves. The petition got some support from their co-workers but in the end only about a third of the 400 workers got their jobs back as work at home agents. Unfortunately for Eunice, she remained in her NWNP status.

Living paycheck to paycheck

Even before the lockdown, Eunice said she was already struggling to make ends meet, living only from paycheck to paycheck. On a regular payday (each fortnight), Eunice will take home between P9,000 to P10,000. She must pay rent, utilities (water, electricity and internet), and food and supplements for her child. And since she is a working mom, she must pay for childcare. In the end, she is left with only P2,000 for her personal allowance (food and transportation) for two weeks. “I don’t mind if I have to sacrifice my personal needs as long as I am able to provide my child’s milk. I really stretch out my budget to the point that I have to restrict my meals to twice a day,” Eunice shared.

Having no work - no pay is thus a nightmare for Eunice. She consumed her limited leave credits so she can still have some pay. But once it was used up, she had to borrow money from her relatives to support her child, “I defaulted on my monthly rent and utility bills. By early July, I was able to file for a calamity loan [from the Social Security System] but most of it had been used up to repay my debts.”

A few months into floating, the company started offering them jobs to new clients but for a lower salary—such a ruthless way of maximizing the pandemic and economic hardship of workers to cheapen labor. She shared:

“Even before the pandemic, there were already rumors that the company is going to reduce its workforce and reduce labor costs. I think the pandemic and the lockdown made it easier for them to implement this. They are replacing us with workers who will be willing to accept lower salaries... Some of my co-workers already lost interest in coming back [to the company because] we have to keep on asking them if there are any developments. They update us regularly. And oftentimes, the human resource department’s response is template—‘we’ll look for new accounts available.’”

Plea to government and BPO companies

Because Eunice is a BPO worker, it became harder for her to seek government assistance during the lockdown, even if she is eligible because she is a single parent. “During the lockdown, I was able to get some relief goods like rice, etc. I was excluded in the social amelioration program (SAP) in our village even if I am in no work - no pay. When they learned I was a single parent, they said I will be included in the second tranche of the SAP. However, it took her about two months to receive government aid. I am still waiting to receive it,” Eunice said.

Like most BPO workers, Eunice hopes that the government will include them in the government aid during the pandemic. “The government should also support us, BPO workers, not just the poorest of the poor. We too are having a hard time during the crisis. It is also frustrating that government aid is too little and too late. I wonder where all the government money went. Up to now, we haven’t received the second tranche of SAP,” Eunice added.

Because of the seemingly hopeless situation in her current company Eunice, she must find new means to survive. “Every day, I am tirelessly looking for a job. I even tried taking on male jobs,” Eunice shared. Luckily, she has some prospects in taking on a work at home job as an English tutor.

If there is any silver lining, Eunice learned the value of solidarity and organization among workers because of

the petition they circulated and the BIEN chapter they were eventually able to organize. “With BIEN, we know we have people we can depend on. There is some way that our grievances can be heard by the government and the companies.”#

Story 4 Lost life and livelihood during the pandemic

Risking life and limb during the pandemic, plenty of call center workers are forced to work back on-site simply because they have no other choice—either they die of the virus or their family dies of hunger. Unfortunately, for the family of Dina, her father Neil,⁸ 50 years old, a worker in a leading global call center company, succumbed to the deadly disease a few days after being sent home by their company due to fever.

Neil is the main provider of their family, according to his child, Dina. He is a father to seven children and his partner is focused on rearing their kids. He worked in the Quezon City site of a leading call center company for about ten years. When the government enforced a lockdown in mid-March, Neil stayed at home. The company did not provide financial assistance and there was no option to work from home. To continuously support his family during the lockdown, Neil used his leave credits.

As his leave credits have been used up, Neil came back to work when the lockdown was relaxed. He was careful to not contract the virus. At first, he rode the company shuttle going to the office since there was no public transportation. Eventually, he decided to ride his bike because the shuttles are a bit crowded. He also decided to stay in the office during his work days and he only came home to his family once a week during rest days.

Avoiding responsibility

Call centers are considered COVID hotspots and the virus can easily be transmitted. Following the relaxed lockdown in Metro Manila starting June 2020, more and more call center companies sent workers back to work on-site. Without mass testing and more stringent safety guidelines at the workplace, COVID cases in call centers rose. By August 2020, the BPO Industry Employees Network already documented at least 15 call center sites where workers contracted COVID-19. In one call center site, over 150 workers contracted COVID-19 and workers are often left on their own to get a swab test and treatment. Contact tracing is slow and workers exposed to positive patients at the workplace are merely sent home for home quarantine.

Similar thing happened to Neil. He was sent home by his company on August 24 after he exhibited fever at work. According to Dina, her father had on and off fever for three days before he was sent home. The company also did not bother to advise Neil to visit a doctor, much less get a swab test for COVID 19. On August 28, his father decided to visit a community clinic because he still had a fever. The clinic only advised him to stay at home and if his symptoms worsen, then he should get a swab test. By Aug. 30 at around 9pm, Neil started to feel shortness of breath. His family rushed him to the hospital at around 1am of August 31 and by 2am, he was declared dead.

Loss of provider

It was only a few days after Neil's death when Dina's family confirmed that his father tested positive for COVID19. Because of this, their entire household was placed in quarantine. Four of Dina's siblings tested positive for COVID 19; all of them are asymptomatic.

Neil is the main provider of the family; his death is thus a big blow to his family's livelihood. Dina and all of her siblings – are still in school. Dina is currently in 2nd year college and her youngest sibling is only seven years old. They live in a low-cost community housing and they amortize the land for only P 275.00 (roughly 5.50 USD). In order to build their house, Neil incurred personal debts of up to P 150,000.00 (roughly 3,000 USD). He was still repaying this debt before he died.

The limited income during the lockdown also prevented them from paying their monthly dues – land amortization, debt payments, utility bills (water and electricity). The pandemic, lockdown, and death of Neil drove Dina and her family to impoverishment and hunger. Dina narrates:

“We had to live on a budget. Before, we could still afford to buy chicken for meals, after the lockdown we had to eat simpler foods. Right now, we have zero income. We depend on the food packs consisting of rice, sardines, and instant noodles, provided to us by the village council (local government). In order to stretch the limited supply that we have, we only cook rice once a day and we have to make it last from morning breakfast till dinner.”

They received P8,000 (roughly 160 USD) worth of cash aid (Social Amelioration Program, SAP) from the government once and a few kilos of rice but such is barely enough to keep them afloat especially now the head of the family succumbed to COVID-19.

Dina and her family are eligible to receive a monthly social pension as part of his father's benefits from the social security system (SSS). But bouncing back from this crisis will be hard and long. What Dina gleans from the tragic death of his father is the need for companies and the government to be proactively in ensuring the safety and health of workers and their families during the pandemic:

“Next time a worker gets sick in the workplace, the company should not simply send home the worker like what they did to my father. They should immediately have the worker checked by a doctor and conduct a swab test, so a similar tragedy will not happen again.”

Indeed, social protection in this context goes beyond providing cash aid to impoverished people but provision of free and immediate health services to all, to protect lives and livelihoods during and post pandemic.#

CONCLUSION

Social protection is imperative so workers and their families can bounce back from the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Such is necessary and integral to any economic recovery program of the government. In particular the government is challenged to take the following actions as part of an inclusive and development-oriented social protection program during the pandemic:

1. Significantly increase government spending on cash aid or wage subsidy for workers affected by company slowdown, retrenchment, closure, or floating during the pandemic.
2. Increase healthcare spending and provide free regular COVID-19 testing and COVID-19 treatment for workers and their families either thru PhilHealth or other government programs.
3. Mandate BPO companies to provide hazard pay to workers working on-site.
4. Provide quarantine leave benefits and/or other COVID-19 wage benefits through Social Security System for workers who have been exposed to COVID positive patients in the workplace and/or those who are on-leave while undergoing COVID-19 medical treatment.

BIEN has also advocated for 18 BPO workers' demands during the pandemic.⁸ These demands include demands for appropriate and effective health response, ensuring economic security, and protection of labour rights during the pandemic. These are:

A) Ensure occupational health and safety thru

1. Free mass testing, immediate contact tracing, and free treatment of COVID 19.
2. Quarantine facilities for BPO workers
3. Resumption of workplace inspection
4. Near-site accommodation and/or door to door shuttle services for BPO employees
5. Mandatory hazard pay for workers working on site
6. Additional health benefits for workers
7. Prohibition of sharing of headsets in call centers

B) Uphold job security and guarantee income thru

8. Stopping floating while hiring by ensuring immediate redeployment of workers to other accounts
9. Re-training or up-skilling workers, if needed, to prevent retrenchment
10. Providing financial assistance or additional paid leaves
11. Providing ample logistical and equipment support to Work-at-Home agents
12. Mandatory provision of internet and electricity subsidy for Work-at-Home agents
13. Protecting work-from-agents from unfair productivity targets and long work hours
14. Improving the country's internet infrastructure thru better government regulation

C) Upholding workers' right to speak up and freedom of association

15. Protecting workers from company retaliation for speaking up about work grievances
16. Ensuring that OSH committees are set up in each work with workers representative

8 Action Network (No Date) "BPO Workers Demands for Safety, Jobs and Rights during the COVID 19 pandemic" Petition by BPO Industry Employees Network. Retrieved from <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/bpo-workers-demands-for-safety-jobs-and-rights-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

17. Ensure workers participation in decision-making at various levels (company, industry-level, regional or national level)
18. Ensure BPO workers' right to self-organize and form unions is respected

In summary, BPO workers, like other Filipino working people, have been gravely affected by the pandemic. Instead of providing the needs of workers, BPO companies cut down on costs (labour and means of production) to keep their companies afloat during the crisis. Lack of prompt health response to the pandemic and adequate and social protection aggravated the situation for BPO workers who are now risking their lives to save their families from hunger and further impoverishment. BPO workers need health and safety, economic security and respect of rights during the pandemic. They are building solidarity and trying to make their voice heard even if they are faced with suppression to push for their demands.#

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