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PRESS RELEASE

Filipino-American Housekeepers Gain EEO Settlement with Navy

Fourteen (14) Filipino-American housekeepers are celebrating the successful settlement of their discrimination complaints with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEO) against the Navy at Point Loma. Earlier this month, the Navy released them from the non-disclosure portion of their settlement agreements, so now these housekeepers can speak freely about their accomplishment in reaching a fair settlement. The celebration is taking place at the Philippine Independence Church.

Like all settlement agreements, the terms are a compromise of the wishes of the two parties. In this case, the housekeepers agreed to end their complaints against the Navy. In return, the Navy agreed to compensate the one housekeeper who they had terminated for the majority of his lost wages and to end the two-year probationary period for the other thirteen housekeepers who returned to work in August 2006. The fact that these housekeepers were able to reach a favorable settlement is testimony to their solidarity and perseverance in seeking justice for over fifteen months.

On June 20, 2006, they had acted as part of a larger group of Asian-American workers who were trying to air grievances about their working conditions at the Combined Bachelor's Quarters on the Point Loma Navy facility. The result was that many of that group, including these 14 workers, were terminated for an alleged "work stoppage" and unapproved attempt to visit the Captain using his "Open Door" policy. In answer to their initial protest of these terminations, all but two of them returned to work with 30-day suspensions, the loss of seven weeks' pay, and a two-year probationary period. The remained two were probationary employees and remained terminated for cause. One of those two joined 13 others in this long appeal process.

This core group of employees sought assistance from the community and the Filipino organization "One Vision One Voice", headed by Dr. Maria Lourdes Reyes, answered the call. Together they reached out for other community support and found the Employee Rights Center,

a non-profit program of the San Diego Labor Council, AFL-CIO and Labor's Alliance that helps low-income immigrant workers get justice at work. These two groups, along with the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice (ICWJ) helped these housekeepers negotiate their return to work and then appeal the harsh, excessive treatment they received from the Navy command.

Along the way, several lessons were learned; the first being that housekeepers working for the Navy have fewer rights than most employees and, because of their cultural background, have to contend with the dangers of misunderstanding their rights. They do not have the right to engage in "protected concerted activity" that employees in the private sector enjoy under the National Labor Relations Act. Furthermore, their presence on a military base further restricts their rights of free speech and assembly. From the beginning these housekeepers were not properly advised of their situation at work on June 20 and, as a result, they were allowed to put their jobs in jeopardy. The Center argued that this disregard amounted to a form of illegal ethnic discrimination.

With the help of the Center, these 14 housekeepers filed grievances and discrimination complaints to try and find justice within the Navy procedures. It was not until a meeting with the Captain in December 2006 that they heard from the Navy itself as to why they were punished so severely for the misunderstandings on June 20. Still, there was no relief from within the Navy, so they pushed their complaints to the EEO. There was a legal battle to have these complaints accepted and they finally won that battle at the same time the EEO Settlement Officer put together the final agreement. It was the EEO Settlement Officer who finally "heard" the discrimination arguments.

Because of their solidarity this group of housekeepers was able to accept a settlement that compensated most the housekeeper who risked his job to join them. Because of their perseverance they were able to wait long enough for someone in EEO to hear and understand their point of view and use it to fashion the settlement agreement. Solidarity and perseverance, along with the courage to stand up and be heard at work, among non-union workers must be celebrated whenever they occur - especially when they result in relief from the injustices they seek to speak out against. Justice, however small, is sweeter when won! Congratulations to our 14 Filipino-American housekeepers!

