

Written by

Friday, 18 January 2013 18:57 - Last Updated Saturday, 19 January 2013 22:33

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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CHICAGO (*FAXX/jGLi*) –Exactly two months to the day when an oil rig fire and explosion blasted to death three Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW's) and seriously injured three others in the Gulf of Mexico abutting Grand Isle, Louisiana, one of the surviving relatives of the fatalities broke her silence during a press conference Wednesday (Jan. 16) at the Bayanihan Community Center in Woodside, New York and laid the blame squarely on one of the employers of her father for taking “away my father. If we ask for the life of our father, can they give it back to us? He died because of greed of the company.”

Jade Diane Tajonera, daughter of Avelino Tajonera, one of the three Filipino workers killed in the explosion at the oil platform owned by Houston, Texas-based Black Elk Energy last Nov. 16, 2012, told a press conference hosted by the Philippine Forum, the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCON) and other area human rights and cause-oriented organizations, “We are here to fight. OFW's are humans, not animals, not robots. We salute all OFWs, who leave the country and provide for their families.”

Survivors Blame Inaction Of Oil Rig Company for OFW Deaths - MabuhayRadio

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Her mother, Edna Tajonera, said the employer of her husband violated Filipino tradition when it did not “allow his co-workers to attend his funeral,” sobbing while clutching the urn containing his ashes.

She spoke of tremendous loss of her high school sweetheart, who became her husband for the last 30 years, 17 years of those spent working abroad.

Her husband, Avelino Tajonera, 49, a welder from Bataan, was among the three who died during the Nov. 16 explosion. The two other fatalities were Jerome Malagapo, 28, pipefitter from Cebu’s suburban Danao City; and

Ellroy Corporal, 42, rigger from Iligan City

Mrs. Tajonera also denounced Black Elk Energy for not complying with safety working conditions, which, she said, if addressed early on by authorities, could have not led to the death of her husband and two other Filipino workers. “Why did they have to wait for someone to die?” Mrs. Tajonera asked.

Mrs. Tajonera also thanked the community organizations, the lawyers and the other Filipino workers for extending help to their family, which, she said, gives them the courage and strength

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to fight for her husband's cause.

Seriously burned were Renato Dominguez, 52, Wilberto Ilagan, 50, and a third Filipino, whose name could not still be disclosed at the request of his family.

The press conference was a precursor to a multi-million dollar damage suit that will be filed against the victims' employers, notably, Black Elk Energy, based in Houston.

Also on hand are some of victims' 70 co-workers, who had filed a class-action suit before Judge Kurt D. Engelhardt of the United States District Court in Eastern District of Louisiana in New Orleans for forcing them to live in an overcrowded, substandard housing facilities owned by Grand Isle Shipyard in Louisiana and operated and managed by Grand Isle Shipyard, DNR (Danilo [N. Dayao], Nilfil [Peralta] and Randolph [F. Nunez Malagapo]), Filipino treaty investors visa holders; D&R, re-styled acronym for "Danilo [Dayao] and Randolph [Malagapo], both U.S.-based placement agencies; and Thunder Enterprises, Inc. of Louisiana.

They also condemned the defendants for violation of labor laws, RICO, Civil Rights Act, Klu Klux Klan Act of 1871, Louisiana Civil code, breach of contract, involuntary servitude and trafficking among others

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EX & CURRENT GIS WORKERS ASKED TO JOIN CLASS SUIT

The family members and workers of the Black Elk Energy explosion and former workers of Grand Isle Shipyard spoke about their experiences on this ordeal, especially on issues of labor abuse and human rights, to raise awareness and gather support within the community for their campaign.

The Filipino workers, who launched the Justice for Grand Isle Shipyard Filipino Workers (J4GIS -Fil-Workers) Campaign, are also drumming up awareness for some 162 OFW's in the United States, who left the slave-like and prison-like living condition of Grand Isle Shipyard, to sign up in the "Opt-In Consent Form" by mailing it to one of the plaintiffs' lawyers if they want join the class action suit. They can mail the form to Atty. Ellaine A. Carr at 2434 Pass Road, Ste. A. Biloxi, MS 39531, E-mail address: ecarr@ellainecarrlaw.com, Toll Free (877).643.2112 or Tel. (288) 273.4410 or Fax No. (866)929.9201 or her website: www.ellainecarrlaw.com

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The former workers have until 90 days from the court notice on Nov. 29, 2012 or approximately on or before Feb 28, 2013, to send in their Opt-In Consent Form.

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There are an estimated 500 OFWs, who worked and are still working at Grand Isle Shipyard, most of them leaving when they could no longer stand the hostile work and living environment.

Most of these workers are now in the Philippines, who could qualify and belong to the class. There are about 300 more OFWs believed still working at Grand Isle Shipyard despite the horrific living condition because they would become jobless if they go home to the Philippines

. Current workers can also send in their Opt-in Consent Form and should not be intimidated by retaliation, according to one of the plaintiffs' lawyers, who refused to be identified because of the gag order on lawyers on the case issued by Judge Engelhardt

During the press conference, Anne Beryl Corotan, representative of the Philippine Forum and the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCON), opened up by noting the precarious conditions of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in the United States. She also presented the demands of the J4 GIS-Fil-Workers Campaign, "We demand for the shut down of GIS, Black Elk and the DNR Offshore Crewing Services and for the Filipino workers who are still working at the GIS to be granted humanitarian visas. We demand for President Benigno Aquino III and the rest of his administration to uphold the rights and welfare of all migrant workers and to genuinely provide the services that the workers need."

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"PH GOVERNMENT DID NOT HELP OFWs"

Ricardo Ramos, one of the former GIS workers, said, "If the Philippine government was genuinely interested in helping us workers here, whom they even call modern-day heroes, then these abuses, these deaths, would never have happened. We demand justice for our co-workers who died and for all workers who have become victims of GIS, Black Elk and DNR Offshore Crewing Services."

Ferdinand Garcia, one of the first among the former workers of GIS who filed the class action lawsuit against the company, said the embassy knew of their conditions as early as 2010, but when asked what help the Philippine embassy extended to them, he simply said, "Wala. (Nothing.)" Garcia added, "We demand that the president give importance to Filipinos who bring in bulk of remittances to the country."

Even non-Filipinos also joined the press conference.

"This year, we are commemorating 150th year of the Emancipation Proclamation. But until now,

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2013, modern-day slavery still exists victimizing hundreds of our Filipino brothers and sisters. We must fight to end slavery in all forms,” Angel Martinez of People’s Organization for Progress (POP) said.

“We are the Mexican, Indian and other workers who went on strike to protest forced labor at a crawfish processing plant that supplies to Wal-Mart in Louisiana called CJ’s Seafood. Like our Filipino brothers, we were also forced to work like machines doing 15 to 24 hour shifts per day. We were also threatened but we also decided to unite and build power to demand responsibility from those who benefited from our forced labor. We are here to fight side by side with our Filipino brothers,” Saket Soni of the National Guestworkers Alliance said at the press conference.

Sisa Pakari Cultural and Labor Center and Frente Unido de Inmigrantes Ecuatorianos (FUIE) were also at the press conference to express support.

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY FOR OFWs

Julia Camagong, representative of International Migrants Alliance (IMA) in the United States, said, “The

GIS

Filipino workers have the support of over 100 grassroots member organizations of IMA

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across the globe. We demand that Philippine Ambassador to the US Jose Cuisia, Jr. resign because he did not perform his responsibility to protect the rights and welfare of the Filipino migrants in the

United States

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