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Martorell: Human trafficking requires a global response

By Chanchanit Martorell
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THIS past month, the Thai Community Development Center (Thai CDC) held a number of activities to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the landmark El Monte Thai slavery case and the workers' freedom.

Thai CDC played a pivotal role in that case when it helped the workers ultimately achieve justice and go on to lead independent and productive lives. On the occasion of the 15th anniversary, Thai CDC, together with Los Angeles' oldest repertory not-for-profit theater, Company of Angels, premiered the acclaimed play, "Fabric," by local award-winning playwright Henry Ong, which dramatizes the real-life horrific tale of oppression, greed and modern-day slavery right in our very own back yard.

Despite having seen victories for the workers in the El Monte case, we urge the public to remain vigilant against exploitative conditions in the workplace. Soon after taking on the case of the El Monte workers, Thai CDC realized the El Monte case was just the tip of the iceberg.

Since that case, Thai CDC has handled half a dozen more cases in the course of 15 years involving over 400 Thai victims trafficked for sexual slavery and forced domestic work, welding, and agriculture.

We currently operate the Rescue and Restore Anti-Trafficking Program, which comes to the immediate aid of Thai slave-labor victims upon their discovery or escape and provides a response team to address their multi-faceted needs.

Thai CDC has been confronted by new and

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even more unsettling trafficking and slavery cases - forced prostitution, involuntary servitude, debt peonage, even the renting of children for use in the trafficking of women. Sadly, a large number of cases in the U.S. continue to involve Thai workers and, contrary to common perception, males not females.

Despite having seen a lot of progress in the anti-trafficking field, most of the world is still waking up to the reality we have been forced to recognize through experience: Trafficking and slavery are emerging as the world's greatest and fastest growing threats to human rights around the world.

But unlike the El Monte situation, not every trafficking case has victims who feel empowered, or witnesses willing to testify, or material evidence. Not every trafficking case is met by a legal team willing and able to champion their

cause. Not every trafficking case captures the attention of the media. Our work, therefore, has not ended, it has only just begun.

Social justice organizations should forge a stronger and more powerful union that will broadcast throughout the world their determination to put an end to the human devastation caused by trafficking and slavery. It is the work we do on behalf of trafficking victims that often challenges all the underlying cultural values which govern the relations between genders and social classes.

It is, ultimately, this work which challenges the existing power structure and caste system which make trafficking possible and place so many individuals at risk of losing their most basic human rights.

Having been with the Thai El Monte workers from the day of their liberation as an active participant in their resettlement and in their fight for justice, Thai CDC must not fail to address the wider implications of this case, both in terms of the garment industry as a whole and as a major milestone for labor and immigrant rights communities in Los Angeles.

The coalition effort Thai CDC mobilized to fight for the workers serves as a lesson in the value of broad cooperation among community based organizations, civil rights groups, legal advocates, and organized labor in the struggle for human rights.

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U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis recently commended Thai CDC upon receiving our Social Impact Award for our efforts to ensure that globalization provides benefits and opportunities for workers everywhere, rather than triggering a "race to the bottom."

Some of the factors causing a new form of slavery is global capitalism and the new world economy making capital mobile in search of cheaper labor. With global capitalism's emphasis on profit-making versus sustainable development in the developing world, people are being driven off their land and into slavery.

As the new world economy continues to benefit from the enormous indirect value of slave labor and consumers incessantly seek bargains, extraordinary profits are being reaped from slave-produced goods.

The El Monte case was shattering because it was the first major case to receive national attention, where the old divisions of race, class, language and ethnicity were wiped away and a single, united movement focused on the issues of social and economic justice for all workers, regardless of origin or legal status.

Truly, it was the first labor struggle of global proportions our city has seen, proving that if capital could redraw the old boundaries in its favor, so could the people.

www.thaicdc.org

Chanchanit Martorell is the executive director of the Thai Community Development Center and founding board member of the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking.

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