

**NIFEA Consultation on Labour
21-23 August 2023, Kuala Lumpur**

Theological Communique on Labour

We, clergy, theologians, social scientists, activists, labour leaders, lay workers, including many young Christians from various ecumenical denominations and religious traditions, have gathered at the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) in Kuala Lumpur from August 21 to 23, 2023 as part of the New International Financial Economic Architecture (NIFEA) consultation on labour. Empowered by the liberating power of the Spirit, and driven by our commitment to be in solidarity with the working majority comprised of people, other-than-human beings, and the divine, we reflected on what our faiths have taught us about labour, livelihood, work and human dignity and the relationship between labour and capital, technology, land, caste/race, class, and gender. Our discussions inspired and emboldened us to expose and oppose unjust economic systems that are alienating humankind from labour. It enabled us to promote an “economy of life” that advances a labour-centred approach to development. The immersion programme opened our eyes to the unjust socio-political realities of exploitation, exclusion, and marginalisation experienced by migrant workers and political refugees in the region, which made us aware of our larger predicament that affects humanity and the planet. Our collective discernment and encounter with the poor and excluded prompted us to produce this theological communique on labour with a concrete faith-based plan of action that seeks to advance the dignity of labour.

In Christian understanding, labour is not merely the realm of human activity. In some of the creation stories of the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the divine labours as well. God creates Adam from clay and plants a garden, rather than putting to work others (Genesis 2:4-9). In other creation stories, earth and water labour to bring forth vegetation and living creatures (Gen. 1:11-12; 1:20-22). In many places in the Hebrew Bible God is portrayed as performing labour, including menial labour and feminised labour. Examples include engagements as craftsman, metal worker, gardener, farm worker, construction worker, shepherd, potter, and garment worker—the latter two tasks mostly performed by women in the societies of the time. In these activities, God both continues to create and to preserve what is created. Moreover, in the ancient stories of the Exodus, God joins in solidarity with the Hebrew slaves and in the incarnation Christ, both human and divine, joins the working majority of his time.

If the Christian faith is related to all of life, labour is an essential part of it because life would not even exist without the cooperation of productive and reproductive labour of people, other-than-human nature, and the divine. Labour, it can be argued, is at the heart of the concerns of faith understood as an “ultimate concern” of humanity and a matter of being and not-being. There would be no life at all without reproductive labour. The reproductive labour of women for instance, including gestational labour, is fundamental for all of human life. Unfortunately, this

labour is often unacknowledged and undervalued, relegated to non-dominant genders and marginalised people. This situation has only worsened with the onset of capitalist economies, which treated the reproductive labour of other-than-human nature in similar ways, as externalities. In this economic system, the productive labour of the 99 percent of humanity who have to work for a living has also been devalued, depressing not only wages and benefits across the board for the growing profits of the few, but also reducing respect for labour and the voice of the many. While we affirm political and religious democracy, we realise that economic democracy is often lacking. In the process, the divine is no longer envisioned in solidarity with the working majority but in the image of the dominant powers of the age, putting the future of faith itself at risk, together with the future of humanity and life on Planet Earth. In this context, we also affirm the need for rest and leisure, modelled by Godself resting on the on the seventh day of creation (Gen. 2:2).

The severe nature of these changes can best be seen where exploitation manifests itself in multiple ways in the lives of women and people of non-dominant genders who are marginalised and whose labour is most severely exploited but on whose shoulders everything rests. This is truly “essential labour,” a term coined during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some coming from war hit contexts, seeking better life and work opportunities in another land, they soon realised that their struggle is more complex than they imagined as they are deprived of basic human rights such as access to healthcare, education, work opportunities, and so on. Without these very basic rights, they are pushed to carving out other ways for survival which includes taking up jobs where they are underpaid and exploited. Their stories throw light on a system that affects the majority of humanity that has to work for a living, not only in the global South but also in the global North, many of whom may not yet realise the increased challenges not only to themselves but also to their families and communities.

[Nevertheless, labour is not only the site of exploitation which results in various oppressions but remains a prime place of resistance, agency, and the fertile ground for the construction of alternatives.](#) Places of work and labour are the places of greatest diversity, bringing together people of all races, genders, ages, and abilities, providing the ground for solidarity. In the words of the apostle Paul, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor 12:26).

The deep solidarity emerging here brings together diverse humanity, other-than-human nature, and the divine in new embodiments of unity-in-difference. Such solidarity transcends models of advocacy that fail to understand our common predicament and is grounded in the energy that emerges when all cooperate and share the depths of their various faith traditions for the flourishing of life. Many of the accomplishments of labour movements, formal and informal, both past and present, cooperative enterprises and businesses, and the development of economic democracies all over the world witness to this. The future of faith, humanity, and life on Planet Earth is being worked out “with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

Inasmuch as human society has made great strides in terms of economic growth and development, it has also increased the gap between the rich and the poor. The rich become richer while the poor become poorer. We understand poverty to be an unacceptable deprivation in human well-being that can comprise both physiological and social deprivation. Physiological deprivation involves the non-fulfilment of basic material or biological needs, including inadequate nutrition, health, education, and shelter. Social deprivation widens the concept of deprivation to include risk, vulnerability, lack of autonomy, powerlessness, and lack of self-respect. By this definition, the poor in our society are those people and communities who are not only unable to secure the goods and services to meet these basic material needs, but are also vulnerable, powerless, at risk, and lack autonomy and self-respect.

Migrants and refugees, particularly non-dominant genders and young people, experience increased exploitation and oppression in our society today. They lack social protection and security, have no access even to basic human rights, experience no sense of identity and dignity, and thus are the most exploited, undervalued, underpaid, and dehumanised. They exist and hope, despite the laws (or none), policies, and practices that threaten their very existence. Moreover, they are agents in their own right who embody resilience and contribute valuable alternatives.

These populations throw light on an economic system that benefits the very few and adversely affects the 99 percent who have to work for a living. While those in the middle are made to believe that they benefit from this system and have more in common with the top than with the bottom, life is becoming increasingly precarious around the globe for the majority, endangering the survival of humanity and the flourishing of life on the planet.

This gathering is just a beginning, drawing on existing projects and engagements. It takes the form of protracted and sustained dialogues and commitments between church people and labour movements, keeping in mind that most of us have to work for a living. It is our hope that as we go back to our respective church communities and ministries, we may be able to bring to the people, the “good news” we received from this gathering. Realising that we are into this together, we dedicate ourselves to:

1. The task of conscientisation that empowers people to identify unjust socio-political structures that prevents all of us from achieving our full humanity;
2. assist all of us to organise ourselves and help strengthen existing resistance movements and work towards the formation of alternatives;
3. form solidarity with industrial and agricultural workers, migrant workers, the semi-proletariats, the refugees especially non-dominant genders, women, and children by actively participating in resistance movements against an exploitative capitalist system;



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4. actively participate in the building of live alternatives wherever they emerge, including worker cooperatives, community-based projects, and other projects of the solidarity economy.

In this work we are committed to international, intersectional, and interreligious cooperation that respects and embraces differences constructively. We need each other because none of are able to do this work alone. We put our hope in the multitudes of people of good will, the planet, and the divine.



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