English-Only at Bon Secours

From what I read, there is a nursing shortage in the Global North. From North America to Japan and from Europe to the Gulf countries, rich societies suffer from a “care deficit,” which they fill by importing – mostly female – labor from the global South. I have published about the intersection of language, gender and global care chains before (check out our resources section on “Language, Migration and Social Justice”).

If there is a nursing shortage in a country like the USA, it’s hard to understand why a US hospital, Bon Secours Hospital in Baltimore, would choose to fire four nurses from the Philippines for no other reason than that they spoke Tagalog during lunch break. Current management theory suggests that it’s a good idea to minimize staff turnover and to try and hang-on to talent when you have it, particularly in an area with a shortage of qualified workers. So, how come four nurses get dismissed, without warning, for no other reasons than that they spoke a bit of Tagalog? Not even on the job but during break-time, and, for all I can gather from the media reports not even a Tagalog-only conversation but Tagalog-words mixed into an English conversation.

Indeed, when the four nurses filed a discrimination complaint, their lawyer argued that the lack of guidelines in the hospital’s English-Only rule made it impossible to abide by:

According to the lawyer, the hospital could not actually cite specific instances where or when the alleged violations of their English-Only rule had taken place. Huh?! How come an organization that claims to have “respect, justice, integrity, stewardship, innovation, compassion, quality and growth” as their core values can suspend all of these, and plain common sense to boot, in dismissing four employees without good documentation and due course? Not to mention that it’s economically irrational to dismiss health workers for no good reason when there is a shortage of them.

English-Only rules are born of ignorance and bigotry and they breed more of the same. It’s sad to see that the idea of English-Only was obviously so powerful at Bon Secours Baltimore that it suspended all other considerations.

As an afterthought, I can’t help wondering about the wisdom of throwing English-Only stones when you sit in a Bon-Secours-glasshouse …