

Isang Pagpupugay [Homage]

Philippines, from Martial Law times to this June: Who was labor leader Romy Castillo to this young activist?

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When I first joined the socialist movement around eight years ago, comrades said I was the long lost son of a certain “Ka Romy.” I did not know who Ka Romy was then, but they thought we shared some physical features: dark, thick, curly hair, thick glasses, and a huge appetite for beer. The teasing comrades told me he was the founding chair of the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (Solidarity of Filipino Workers, or BMP).

Days later, I met Ka Romy Castillo at a rally. The comrades teased him, “O Ka Romy, *narekrut namin ang nawawala mong anak* (Ka Romy, we’ve recruited your long lost son).” His reaction was priceless. It was the first time I heard his trademark baritone laugh “hee hee hee!” Then, he tapped my shoulders, and said, “*Handa ka na bang sumama sa mga manggagawa* (Are you ready to join the workers)?”

I was then a wide-eyed student activist from a state university that took pride in producing intellectuals. From what I understood then, we from the so-called YS (youth and students) took activism with pride—we saw ourselves as enlightened individuals armed with advanced knowledge on how to address society’s woes. The working class and the toiling masses, which Ka Romy led, were the ones we’re supposed to serve for they will ultimately revolt to topple the oppressive system.

That was how I started my relationship with Ka Romy, who finished his battle with lung cancer on June 5. In his demise, the working class movement lost one of its most enduring leaders who waged revolution even under in the most inhumane conditions. To me, I lost a mentor, drinking buddy, father figure, and most of all, a sincere comrade who saw the best in me.

‘Thoroughbred laborer’

As a young student, I became an activist partly because I sincerely yearned for justice and change, being raised in a poor working class family in a squatter’s area, and partly because I was searching for relevance at a time when young people behaved like submissive pet dogs.

However, Ka Romy would always remind me that the revolution is beyond myself, or beyond the sector I represent. Alluding to Marx, he would say that this is a war between two classes with me being in the middle. He would persuade me to wage various struggles as means to achieve our movement’s end: to strengthen and prepare the working class movement toward revolutionary change.

Ka Romy held such strong Marxist view because Marxism is essentially the philosophy of workers and he came from the working class. While he never reached high school, Ka Romy exhibited

superior intelligence and wisdom because of his experience as a sugar farmer in Negros, factory worker and union leader in Philippine Blooming Mills in Pasig, international relations officer of Kilusang Mayo Uno (May One Movement, or KMU), and eventually, founding chair of BMP from 1993 to 1996 (when BMP was then known as Bukluran ng Manggagawa para sa Pagbabago or Solidarity of Workers for Change). On top of these stellar distinctions, Ka Romy described himself in a newspaper interview as a “thoroughbred laborer.”

Ka Romy was a mover of a ragtag and indomitable breed of activists during the Martial Law years. When the radical student activists of the First Quarter Storm either took their struggle to the hills to wage a people’s war or simply withered away to oblivion and abandon their activist roots, workers in the industrial zones of Metro Manila and its peripheries took the struggle to the streets at a time when holding a rally means burying one foot in the grave. The backbone of the anti-Marcos Laban campaign in the 1978 interim congressional elections, workers created waves of protests.

Ka Romy did not simply participate in these protests; he was an astute tactician and orator, an eloquent speaker and thinker. In July 23, 1984, he along with four comrades was abducted by military men in Antipolo. Believed to be communist insurgents, the so-called “Antipolo 5” received the harshest forms of torture.

Upon his release in 1986, Ka Romy was immediately tasked by KMU to build international ties with trade unions in Europe. Ka Romy was such a valuable asset for KMU in this area for he was fluent in English and Spanish. During this mission, he made friends with Communist Party of the Philippines founder Joma Sison, whom he sometimes beat in chess. In this stint, Ka Romy became a staunch internationalist, building solidarity across borders. His vigor in this work was such that he was incarcerated for a second time for participating in a labor rally in Malaysia in 2011. He would also volunteer as interpreter for English- or Spanish-speaking foreign activists in events hosted by BMP.

In 1989, Ka Romy returned to the Philippines and was elected chair of KMU National Capital Region (KMU-NCR). In 1992, he was one of the leaders of the split of KMU-NCR from KMU over ideological differences. In an interview with labor magazine *Koop Obrero* in 1994 regarding the split, Ka Romy said, “BMP declared that its ultimate objective is socialism, that the national democratic struggle is just a phase in this objective.” How is BMP different from other activist organizations? Ka Romy explained to me in that BMP is for the interest of the workers as a class, and not just for the interest of the Filipino nation.

Ka Romy thus became a leader of BMP, subsequently serving as its secretary general and representative in tripartite committees and in BMP’s international partnerships. He also served as deputy secretary-general of the socialist electoral party Partido Lakas ng Masa (Party of the Labouring Masses, or PLM).

Indomitable spirit during Martial Law

One of the highlights of Ka Romy’s life was when he became a desaparecido (disappeared), torture victim, and political prisoner from 1984 to 1986. He endured and survived the most brutal forms of torture: his balls were burned and electrocuted, his penis was skewered with a barbecue stick, his head was dumped in a feces-filled toilet bowl, and his body received endless punching and slapping. His tormentors also pulled the trigger of an unloaded revolver aimed at his head. Notwithstanding all these, he would brag that he was able to have two children with his late wife Tessie.

In 2008, during a student forum to mark the anniversary of Martial Law, Ka Romy was invited to talk about the horrors of those times. The forum started with the showing of *Eskapo*, a movie about the

escape of Senator Sergio Osmena III and television magnate Eugenio Lopez Jr. from prison in 1977. In that film, the two bigwigs were detained in a modestly sized cell and granted conjugal visits, which were an opportunity for their wives to smuggle in tools for their escape.

When it was his turn to speak, Ka Romy calmly narrated his ordeal and highlighted the sharp contrast in the military regime's treatment of detainees from the capitalist class and the working class. "Osmena and Lopez, along with their fellow elite, received special treatment while the workers were tortured and killed," he pointed out. "That kind of treatment shows that Marcos was only after the property of his rivals in the elite but when it came to the workers, he was genuinely scared because we were the only ones who were willing to fight and sacrifice everything to free society."

On our way to the office after that forum, Ka Romy reminded me to always cite the political and ideological context of the human experience, that his suffering at the hands of the State should not be romanticized for it is a political response against the brewing working class movement of the time.

Ka Romy continued to be bold and daring especially on issues that necessitated the most radical response. When news about the Maguindanao Massacre broke out, Ka Romy gathered all of us in the office to plan for an immediate action. He suggested that we spray-paint the streets of Kalayaan Avenue, V. Luna, East Avenue, and EDSA with messages of condemnation against the carnage. Despite the high risk of arrest, we did as he planned and caught the attention of motorists, traffic aides, policemen, and the media; most approved of our action. For the record, BMP, led by Ka Romy, was the first organization to register its condemnation of the massacre.

In the twilight of his life, Ka Romy was an active participant in the anti-pork barrel rallies and stood as the spokesman of BMP in the anti-pork struggle, despite being diagnosed with cancer. Even if his body was fragile, he continued to spend his life among members of his class and the revolution they waged.

The end is the start

News about Ka Romy's death was announced on the day when BMP launched its legislative campaign for labor protectionism seeking to amend the Labor Code to ensure full protection of employment and curb the plague of contractualization, union busting, and unfair labor practices. His death came at a time when the labor movement was once again gaining ground amidst widespread corruption and worsening poverty under the Aquino administration.

Last May 1, around 25,000 laborers trooped to the streets to condemn anti-worker policies. On June 12, organized labor is expected to be the biggest contingent in the 6.12.14 anti-pork barrel rally in Manila. It is sad that Ka Romy will no longer be part of this resurgence.

While writing this, I hear Ka Romy's frequent reminders: "The workers must be the spokesperson of the people."

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P.S.

* Interaksyon. The online news portal of TV5. June 9, 2014 1:17 PM:

<http://www.interaksyon.com/article/88702/isang-pagpupugay--who-was-labor-leader-romy-castillo-to-this-young-activist>