

# Philippines: Urban poor strongly represented in new socialist party

Friday 13 February 2009, by [BOYLE Peter](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2009).

Bulacan, Philippines, February 1, 2009 - "We are the bat people, the people who live under bridges in Manila", explained urban poor organiser Ka Lisa as she took a small group of international observers around a section of an urban poor relocation settlement in Bulacan, about 60 kilometres north of Manila.

Since 2002, entire communities of urban poor people have been forcibly relocated to Bulacan from their "squatter" shanty homes in Manila to make way for never-to-be-completed rail and road developments ordered by the corrupt government of President Gloria Arroyo.

These projects are publicly derided as "the most expensive road/railway line in the world" as they cost millions of pesos to progress just a few metres because of systematic graft in major government contracts.

The relocation of urban poor people evicted from Manila has become a further source of corruption. "This is a privately owned relocation project", explained Ka Lisa. "The government collects the rent from us and pays it to the private owner."

"And if we want anything done, even basic services, we have to bribe officials", she added.

Back in Manila, the urban poor scrape a living sorting rubbish (many live on or near rubbish tips), or working as casual day labourers or as fisherfolk. But in Bulacan that is no work and to travel to Manila costs between 100-200 pesos when the basic income for labourers is only 300 pesos a day. The journey to Manila can take up to two hours each way, as we discovered for ourselves.

To make things worse, since 2005 the urban refugee communities in Bulacan have faced aggressive military repression. An army detachment set up in the area and began hunting down community organisers and activists, tagging them "communists". Residents were herded into local squares or halls, shown propaganda films about the "communist threat" and urged to identify and turn in their leaders.

Then followed a series of abductions and disappearances of community activists in Bulacan. A number of youth were picked up and tortured by the military. Ka Lisa and Ka Sally, another urban poor organiser who spoke to us, were forced to go into hiding until last year.

## ZOTO

"We could continue to organise, because the people hid us", explained Ka Sally, noting that this urban poor community had been one of the longest organised in the country, having founded the Zone One Tondo Organisation (ZOTO), the first ever urban poor organisation in the country.

ZOTO is a federation of 182 urban poor local organisations in 14 relocation sites in Metro Manila and nearby areas. These relocation sites are Dasmariñas, Bulihan, General Trias, Tanza and GMA, Cavite; Bagong Silang, Dagat-Dagatan, Tala and Camarin, Caloocan City; Dagat-Dagatan, Malabon City; Dagat-Dagatan Navotas; Tondo, Manila: Sapang Palay, Muzon and Towerville of San Jose Del

Monte, Bulacan and Pandacaqui in Pampanga.

The organisation was founded in 1970 at the Tondo Foreshore Land when the residents' dwellings were to be demolished in favour of an IMF/World Bank funded project – an international port. At that time, this area was the biggest colony of slum dwellers of informal settlers in Asia.

Warding off eviction after eviction and rebuilding lives and homes in the relocation sites, ZOTO continues, in its third decade of activity, to struggle for a community of economically and politically empowered citizens who are accorded their due dignity, who foster gender equality and democracy and live in a healthy and bountiful environment.

### **Partido Lakas ng Masa**

Ka Sally and Ka Lisa are leaders of the urban poor base of the newly formed Power of the Masses Party (Partido Lakas ng Masa — PLM) and they proudly announced that they had already joined up 978 members of this settlement of about 10,000 families.

ZOTO is a founding affiliate organisation of the PLM, the party's PLM vice-chair for international affairs Reihana Mohideen explained. "The PLM's urban poor base is 150,000. Mostly in Metro Manila, this comprises about half the new party's base. The urban poor population in Metro Manila is at least two-thirds of the urban population. They live in shanty town-like slums and are commonly known as 'squatters' as they have no legal rights to the land they occupy." However, an increasing number today are those whose dwellings have been demolished or destroyed due to fires, etc., and are now residing under bridges and in the streets outside the established and generally organised urban poor communities.

"We consider the urban poor to be a part of the working class. Their main demands are for housing and for jobs. Many of the immediate struggles are against demolition and forcible relocation of their communities. Given that the trade unions have suffered terrible setbacks and even defeats owing to the onslaught of neoliberal globalisation in the past decades, the urban poor have been easier to mobilise in struggle in the recent period. We consider the urban poor to be a strategic section of the working class in the struggle against elite rule and for system change in the Philippines."

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### **P.S.**

\* From Links:

<http://links.org.au/node/904>

\* Peter Boyle is national secretary of the Democratic Socialist Perspective and attended the PLM congress as an international observer.

\* Reihana Mohideen, a representative of the Power of the Masses Party (Partido Lakas ng Masa), will be a featured guest at the World at a Crossroads conference, to be held in Sydney, Australia, on April 10-12, 2009, organised by the Democratic Socialist Perspective, Resistance and Green Left Weekly. Visit <http://www.worldATACrossroads.org> for full agenda and to book your tickets.