

The Socialist Tradition in the Trade Union Movement in the Philippines

Friday 14 July 2006, by [MELENCIO Sonny](#) (Date first published: 28 November 2002).

The following is an abridged version of a talk was presented by the BMP at the International Conference on A Century of Labor Struggle in Asia and the Pacific held on November 27-28 in the Philippines. The conference was organized by UP SOLAIR, ILO and FES. Sonny Melencio is the vice-chair of the BMP.

The socialist ideas that proliferated in the Philippines during the early period of the century came from a workers' movement that was influenced by socialist literature and socialist movements in Europe and in Asia. The main leaders of the trade union movement had acquired a theoretical understanding of the aims and directions of the socialist movement through a study of Marxist and anarchist literature.

- Isabelo delos Reyes, who became the president of the first labor federation in the country (the Union Obrera Democratica or UOD in 1902), brought with him various socialist and anarchist literature that he had collected during his previous exile in Spain.
- Lope K. Santos, who became the president of the successor organization in 1903 (the militant federation Union del Trabajo de Filipinas or UTF), was the author of the socialist novel Banaag at Sikat. Together with other militant labor leaders, they set up a workers' school that provided short courses on socialism and the history of the labor movement.
- From 1924 onwards, many labor leaders in the country joined regional and international labor conferences sponsored by the Communist International (Comintern) and its various formations. In mid-1920s, the Congreso Obrero de Filipinas (COF or Workers' Congress of the Philippines), which replaced the UTF, received a number of communist leaders who visited the country, the most noted of whom were Tan Malaka, an Indonesian comrade, and the leaders of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA).

The militant trade union movement in the 1920s impelled the formation of a workers' electoral party. Trade union leaders at that time became conscious of the need to develop their very own 'class party' that could contest elections.

- On November 30, 1925, Crisanto Evangelista and other labor leaders launched the Lapiang Manggagawa (Workers' Party), a workers' electoral party. Lapiang Manggagawa issued a manifesto that shocked the political leaders of the country at that time. It stated that 'the American imperialists and their running dogs in the country' had betrayed the revolution started by the 'proletarian' Andres Bonifacio against the Spanish colonialists in 1886. It urged the workers to take economic and political power away from the capitalist class, and to abolish all class divisions and class rule.

Even the trade union movement or the labor federation itself became more politicized and militant because of the leaders' adherence to the ideology of socialism.

- On May 12, 1929, the COF was replaced by a highly politicized labor federation named the Katipunan ng mga Anak-Pawis sa Pilipinas (KAP or Federation of the Toilers in the Philippines). Its manifesto stated that the aim of the organization is to provide leadership for workers' and peasants' unrest, guide the masses to class consciousness, and encourage militancy.

The highest level of political and class consciousness of the worker-leaders was showcased in their establishment of a revolutionary party that represented the interests of workers as a class. The goal was socialism and communism.

- On August 26, 1930, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) was formed. It was formally launched in a rally at Plaza Moriones, Tondo on November 7, 1930, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

Under condition of colonial rule and imperialist plunder of the country, the trade union movement will naturally gravitate towards political ends. In particular, the trade union movement became an important part of the national liberation movement (NLM) in the country. Proof of this was the trade union movement's taking up of anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist calls. The May 1 rally in 1903 for instance, which was joined in by 100,000 workers, raised the slogans: 'Down with American imperialism!'

There is a sea of difference however between the NLM and the socialist movement. The first does not automatically mean a movement aiming at the eradication of social injustice and the liberation of the working class. The national liberation movement, however militant it is, can still fall under the hegemony of the bourgeoisie or sections of the bourgeoisie (the so-called national bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie). Its struggle may aim at attaining independence and sovereignty for the nation - but it may not mean the complete eradication of exploitation and oppression in society, i.e., one that will truly emancipate the working class in the country.

The experience in the Philippines denotes periods of development where the stresses of the working class movement may vary from the NLM to the socialist movement. The period of the 1920s and 30s, for instance, indicated a stress towards the development of the socialist movement.

- The aims of the movement then were clear-cut socialist: class unity, revolutionary class struggle, seizure of political power, and establishment of a working class state to introduce socialism in the country. The focus was on unifying and strengthening the organizations of the working class in the country - from organizing the unemployed, to forming national industrial unions, to forming factory committees and rural committees for workers in industries and in agriculture.

- The 1920s and 30s show the rise of the revolutionary situation in the country. The workers launched crippling strikes in the cities, while the countryside was wracked with series of uprisings. The most infamous of the strikes was the La Minerva strike where the police massacred five striking workers (Asedillo, one of the leaders of the strike, fled to the Laguna mountains and led a guerrilla army that aimed to overthrow the government). The La Minerva strike and the massacre attracted a wave of sympathy strikes that occurred in Central Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

The upsurge of the working class movement came to a complete halt during World War II or during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in 1942-44. The labor movement was violently crushed. Crisanto Evangelista and many other leaders of the workers movement were arrested, tortured and killed by the Japanese occupiers. The upsurge of the socialist movement was stopped. The trade union movement collapsed.

The once-vibrant struggles in the urban and industrial areas had to shift to guerrilla warfare, the

only possible form of resistance, which based itself in the countryside and among the ranks of the peasantry. The collapse of the workers' movement and the shifting of the liberation movement in the countryside and among the ranks of the peasantry constitute the material basis for what other historians referred in their studies as the weakness of revolutionary movement, or the entrenchment of a 'peasant millenarian world-view' in the Philippine communist movement (see Francisco Nemenzo's "The Millenarian-Populist Aspects of Filipino Marxism").

It was only after the war that the working class movement was able to get back on its feet again. The trade union movement was regrouped and reorganized. Guerrilla leaders of the Hukbalahap (the guerrilla army that was formed by the PKP during the war) set up a Committee on Labor Organization (CLO) to regroup the union movement in the cities. In 1946, this Committee later on became the Congress of Labor Organization. In historical terms, the CLO was so far the biggest confederation of labor that existed in the country (see Rene Ofreneo's "The Rise and Fall of the CLO").

- Throughout its six-year existence, the CLO was subjected to all kinds of harassment by the state. Manuel Joven, its general secretary, was kidnapped and assassinated. A debate ensued within the PKP on the "correct form of struggle, whether to continue with the parliamentary struggle or to shift to armed struggle again". The latter idea won the rounds when just after a few months, a wave of arrests of PKP and other militant leaders drove a number of CLO leaders underground. In 1951, the military arrested en masse the remaining CLO leaders. The CLO was finally outlawed that year.

- The PKP's resumption of armed struggle was aimed at the early overthrow of the government within a two-year frame. According to Nemenzo, this rash decision of the PKP and its guerrilla army (named the HMB at that time) can be rooted out to a millenarian viewpoint that was prevalent among the cadres and fighters of the Party: "The party-led HMB suffered the fate of all other millenarian movements, i.e., it collapsed like a pack of cards the moment its apocalyptic vision of seizure of power in two years was dissolved by the powerful counteroffensives of JUSMAG-AFP."

After the arrests of many PKP leaders and the rout of a big part of its guerrilla army, the anti-communist forces in the Philippines saw the opportunity to grab the leadership of the trade union movement. The collapse of militant unionism and the defeat of the insurrection now constitute the material basis for the demoralization of the trade union movement and the change of character of unionism from 'political unionism' to 'bread-and-butter or rice-and-fish unionism'.

- 1950s to 1960s became a regressive period in the history of the Philippine labor movement. After half a century of political unionism, the labor movement was plunged into economic unionism - no thanks to the efforts of the state and various anti-communist forces, such as the Jesuits, who reoriented the trade union movement into economistic and non-political grounds.

The labor movement benefited in the eruption of student rebellion in the early 1970s, i.e., during what is referred to as the First Quarter Storm (FQS). The leadership of the FQS fell to the hands of a new party (the Communist Party of the Philippines or CPP, a Maoist party) that split from the PKP in 1968. During this period and until the imposition of martial law in 1972, there was a resurgence of union organizing and union struggles aided by the student activists of the FQS generation. Even during the martial law period, leaders and members of the CPP, i.e., those working in the urban areas such as the Manila-Rizal region (MR) of the party, gave stress to developing and regrouping the trade union movement under a militant leadership.

- A resurgence of the trade union movement was felt during a rash of strikes that attended the victory of the La Tondena strike in 1975. This strike in a liquor company was exceptional in so many ways. It was a breakthrough in a period where strike was banned. It was the first 'people-

power' action of sorts, as priests and nuns, students and urban poor activists kept the picket, while workers staged a paralyzing sit-down strike inside the factory.

- The Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) was formed as an aftermath of the strike wave of 1975. However, due to intensified military persecution, the first BMP was dissolved. It was replaced by a short-lived labor coalition called Kapatiran or Kapatirang Anak-Pawis ng Pilipinas. On May 1, 1980, the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) was launched at Araneta Coliseum.

Under the CPP, the socialist movement was again overshadowed by the national liberation thrust of the party. During the May 1 campaign in 1988, a debate erupted between the cadres of the Manila-Rizal region (MR) of the CPP and its national trade union department (NTUD). This was a debate between the socialist line and the national democratic (ND) line of the party.

The MR criticized the basic weakness of the ND line in clarifying among workers the direction and character of their struggles. According to MR, the ND line caters to the interests of workers' allies in the struggles, but fails to address the independent class interests of the workers. At worst, it propagates the line of the 'national bourgeoisie' for a 'nationalist development' of local capitalism. One of the problems with the ND line is its adherence to the formation of a government that comprises a 'bloc of four classes' (the national bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, peasantry, and workers). Under the Maoist approach of the CPP, the socialist demands and socialist character of the workers movement remains a 'perspective' for the movement for a long time. The end-all objective of the movement revolves around the ND program, while socialism is cast as a far-away, long-term objective.

MR argued that the ND program does not have clear reference to workers' independent interests in any of its sections or platforms. For instance, the ND program for national industrialization may aim at dismantling the control of monopoly capital in the Philippines, but the benefits of such act directly accrue to the local capitalists and only in an indirect sense will the workers enjoy such benefits. Under the ND program, the main victory for the working class will revolve around implementation of wage increases and improvement of workers' conditions at worksites. The program does not aim at eradicating wage-system or wage-slavery in the industries.

BMP was resurrected in 1993, when the Metro Manila branch of the KMU broke away and formed a separate organization. From thereon, BMP has grown to become a national labor organization with more than 250 union affiliates and a total membership of 100,000. The BMP espouses a directly socialist orientation as opposed to the KMU's ND orientation for the trade union movement.

- While BMP upholds the importance of the people's struggles for sovereignty and democratic reforms, its goals are directly socialist. BMP subscribes to the abolition of wage slavery (and with it, the eradication of all forms of exploitation and oppression among people), and one of the immediate steps that it is campaigning for towards this goal is workers' control.

- Workers' control means that, in the immediate, or upon the collapse of the ruling capitalists' (and landlords') state, the workers should exercise administrative and economic control of the factory. It will have its own representatives in the real management bodies, with veto power over any decision by management to ensure that workers do control the entire operations of the factory.

- Workers' control will also be instituted in the national economic level, in the economic management bodies of government. Workers' control will have to be replaced by workers' self-management (i.e., without the capitalist, its managers or what not) upon the final overhaul of society and abolition of capitalist private property.

P.S.

* From BMP website. Published by "Labor Power", International Bulletin of the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino, (Solidarity of Filipino Workers), January 2003.