

TO SENATE HALLS FROM THE STREETS

Philippines: Will the labor vote prevail in the midterm elections?

Organizing Filipino workers into unions is not an easy task, and neither is consolidating the labor vote

Monday 13 May 2019, by [REFY Aika](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2019).

- **Labor Win, a coalition of leaders from workers' groups, hopes to bring together a "labor vote" that will help them win a Senate seat in the 2019 midterm elections.**
- **The coalition is facing challenges in different fronts: a disorganized labor movement and a lack of resources to mount a nationwide campaign.**
- **Despite these limitations, experts view the labor leaders' coming together as a "victory" for the movement.**

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MANILA, Philippines – For a coalition of labor leaders, the dream is to elect the “true representatives” of workers in the Senate.

A big chunk of the Filipino population are composed of workers. In fact, the [January Labor Force Survey](#) this year showed that at least 41.4 million Filipinos are eligible to work.

But winning the workers' vote seems like a tall order for the labor-leaders-turned-Senate-bets, despite having unions to back them up.

The Labor Win coalition is composed of former Bayan Muna representative [Neri Colmenares](#), Bukluran ng mga Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) head [Leody de Guzman](#), Federation of Free Workers (FFW) president [Sonny Matula](#), Kilusang Mayo Uno founder [Ernesto Arellano](#), and labor lawyer [Allan Montaña](#).

They aim to push for pro-worker and pro-poor policies in the Senate, notwithstanding the odds.

But preelection surveys say otherwise, with none of these candidates landing in the Magic 12 where they may have a statistical chance of winning.

More than a decade has passed since the Philippine electorate ushered in a labor vote with former senator and trade union leader [Ernesto "Boy" Herrera](#). Will we see it happening again this midterm

elections?

Highs and lows of organized labor

Consolidating the labor vote is not an easy task. For years, organized labor has had its own ups and downs.

A [2009 study](#) by political think tank Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) had chronicled the “decline” in unionism in the Philippine workforce at that time, noting that union membership for both the public and private sector went down by 63% to 1.92 million in 2007 from the previous 3.57-million membership in 1995.

Given that the number of employed Filipinos was only 21.58 million in 2007, with only 1.92 million being union members, only 8.89% of the employed force were part of labor organizations.

In the 2009 study, FES said that organizing the labor force is “more difficult,” citing changes in the workplace – privatization of public services, rise of consulting employment arrangements, rapid pace of technological interventions in the workplace, and resistance to unions.

A decade later, the same is still happening.

Data in the past 6 years as consolidated by the Bureau of Local Relations show a promising rise in organized labor. But the numbers are not stellar still.

At least 8.18% of employed persons were part of unions or associations in 2014, or 3.4 million out of the total employed 41.6 million. A steady rise was evident in the coming years, with a 12.49% membership rate for the first quarter of 2018 as peak.

But the membership rate went down to 11.98% as of the first quarter of 2019, with only 4.7 million workers being part of organizations.

This table shows the percentage of union members among employed Filipinos

YEAR	EMPLOYED	UNION MEMBERS	%
2014	41,600,000	3,402,746	8.18
2015	39,200,000	3,689,432	9.41
2016	40,700,000	4,005,595	9.84
2017	40,300,000	4,909,157	12.18
2018	40,900,000	5,106,487	12.49
2019*	39,247,000	4,701,755	11.98

Employment statistics from 2014 to 2018 are from the April Labor Force Survey. 2019 is from the January Labor Force Survey

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, Bureau of Local Relations.

To break it down, there are 474,915 government employees part of public employees’ unions. In recent years, unionization peaked in 2017 when 545,199 government workers were part of an organization.

In the private sector, the figure inched up yearly, with the first quarter of 2019 having the most members at close to 1.55 million.

Despite the steady but slow rise in union members, less private sector workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements (CBA). In 2019, only about 182,000 employees are covered, down from 225,241 workers in 2017.

How many are part of organized labor?

This chart shows the total reported members of public sector and private sector labor organizations, workers associations, and unions with existing collective bargaining agreement.

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The decline in CBA coverage can be attributed to the lower number of existing CBAs as well. In the first quarter of 2019, there were only 961 unions that were able to successfully negotiate CBAs, down from 2014 with 1,340 unions.

Meanwhile, the loose workers' associations saw a decline in members as well, despite the steady rise in the number of associations. In 2019, there are 66,407 workers' associations, almost double that in 2014 which had 35,411.

However, membership went down to 2.68 million in 2019 after peaking in 2018, when membership grew to 3.1 million.

Organized labor?

This chart shows the number of labor organizations, workers associations, and unions with existing collective bargaining agreement.

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Difficulty in organizing

Despite the "good" numbers, De Guzman admitted that these will not automatically translate to votes for them.

He told Rappler that based on their estimates, active union members who would vouch for Senate bets like them are only around 4% of the total employed Filipinos, or about 1.3 million.

He said that this is why they rely on social media, as well as their volunteers from unions in the provinces who campaign for them.

"We use social media kasi wala naman kaming pera. 'Yun sana ang pinakamaganda para maabot nang mabilis ang maraming manggagawa para masabi sa kanila na meron na silang sariling kandidato," De Guzman said.

(We are using social media because we don't have the resources. And that would be helpful to swiftly reach more workers to tell them that they already have their own candidate.)

They also bank on their credentials as labor leaders, saying that they are the only ones who have the ["real" credentials](#) to represent the workers.

With high hopes, De Guzman said that if the 1.3 million workers were able to convince even just 20 of their friends, that would “translate to 20 million voters.”

Weak, non-existent labor vote

The future of Labor Win candidates securing a Senate seat is dim, given what experts refer to as a “weak and non-existent” workers’ vote.

Former Ateneo School of Government dean Tony La Viña said that the labor vote is “historically hard to achieve,” but the Senate win of Herrera and migrant workers’ champion Blas Ople are some exceptions.

La Viña said that the strategy of Labor Win does not seem to be working, even if they are rallying for pro-worker policies.

“They would have to find a compelling argument why they should be elected. Obviously, their rally against contractualization is not sufficient. That’s what’s happening. If the polls are to be believed, they will not get enough votes,” La Viña told Rappler.

This is on top of not having enough resources to mount a nationwide campaign, he said.

Sociologist and University of the Philippines professor Herbert Docena said that creating a labor vote “will not happen overnight,” especially since this is the first time in recent history that such coming together by labor groups happened.

“The labor vote is weak, if not non-existent, but that is the result of government and corporate attacks on the labor movement in the past 20 years,” Docena said.

The sociologist explained that contractualization issues and anti-labor policies contribute to the weakening of labor organizations, as well as membership in the past years.

“That’s why they rank low in surveys because the workers are disorganized,” Docena said.



PROCLAMATION RALLY. Labor Win coalition, composed of (L-R) Allan Montano, Neri Colmenares, Sonny Matula, Ernesto Arellano, and Leody de Guzman, officially kickstart their senatorial campaign on February 19, 2019. File photo by Aika Rey/Rappler

But Docena said that Labor Win is more than just a coalition. He viewed the coming together of the group as a “breakthrough” in the labor movement, given that the labor groups are situated in different parts of the political spectrum.

“The fact that they managed to come together and agreed to join forces is already very significant. The FFW and BMP - these two are among the biggest blocs. The fact that there is an attempt to come together despite their historical animosities is an achievement. It far outweighs their lagging behind the surveys,” Docena said.

The unity the coalition has exhibited is already a “political victory,” he said.

“They are overcoming their division, recognizing that they face common enemies and that they need to work together to defend themselves and to advance the agenda, not just the interest of the workers, but of the entire nation,” Docena told Rappler.

‘Alternative’ candidates

Labor Win candidates presented themselves as the “alternative” to what they say are senatorial bets who pursue a personal agenda once elected.

“Tingin ko, parang no choice ang mga manggagawang naghahanap ng pagbabago. Tingin ko, ‘pag nakuha nila ‘yung message na para sa kanila ito; tingin ko, ito na ‘yung simula,” De Guzman said.

(I think, workers who are looking for change don’t have a choice. I think if they get the message that this fight is for them, I think, this is the start.)

But the labor leaders admit there are limitations in their campaign. They remain optimistic, however, as Election Day draws closer.

“If the election surveys are to be believed, it is evident that the hold of patronage politics, especially in the ranks of the desperate poor, is still strong. But it will soon break as workers are now beginning to vote not based on individual preferences, but on their common interest as a class,” Matula said.

“We are now witnessing the blossoming of the workers movement as a powerful political force to change society,” he added.

For De Guzman, the unity of the labor movement this election is already a win in itself.

*“Kung hindi man ngayon ay magandang simula ito sa pagpatuloy at pag-build ng labor vote, labor agenda, at later, labor party. O baka maging labor government. Hindi naman masamang mangarap ‘di ba?”*De Guzman said.

(If we don’t win this time, it’s still a great start to continue and build the labor vote, the labor agenda, and perhaps later, the labor party. Or maybe a labor government. It won’t hurt to dream, right?) -

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P.S.

• Rappler.com, MAY 1, 2019:

<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/229380-will-labor-vote-prevail-midterm-elections-2019>