

The Left Needs a Higher Level of Revolutionary Unity

Friday 7 October 2005, by [MELENCIO Sonny](#) (Date first published: 26 May 2005).

Contribution presented at the Silang Seminar “Towards a Democratic, Pluralist and Humanist Framework and Strategy for Social Change”, Silang, Cavite, May 26-28, 2005.

Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [Stumbling Blocs](#)
- [Methods of Work, Methods \(...\)](#)
- [Problem of Sectarianism](#)
- [Leadership Problem of the CPP](#)
- [Next Steps](#)

Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP)

Introduction

We need to have an objective assessment—through a historico-materialist analysis—of the party history starting with the formation of the party (i.e. The Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas or PKP) in the 1930s until today, when a number of parties and party groups (political blocs or polblocs) exists. The problem with past historical analyses, especially what we in our tradition grew up with, was that it was made from a sectarian point of view. From the CPP’s vantage point, the PKP history was painted all black. Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party, one of the documents of the CPP’s founding congress, was a thoroughly biased, sectarian and partisan document.

Looking at the history of the communist movement in general, we can say that contrary to the CPP’s assessment, there were a number of positive milestones in the PKP history including its formation in the forefront of a nascent but vibrant trade union movement in the early 1900s (the first PKP chairperson Crisanto Evangelista was himself a labor leader), its role in the revolutionary upsurge of the 1930s, and in the anti-fascist resistance movement during the Second World War. On the other hand, there were major problems and weaknesses of the party too, such as its accommodation to the returning US forces, its shift to a parliamentary grand alliance with bourgeois political leaders right after the war, and its political deal with the Marcos dictatorship.

I later discovered that one of the problems of the PKP was what I call “Cominternism” or its blind adherence to Comintern policies, including the laying down of arms upon the return of US troops and the shift to the parliamentary/electoral arena in a united front with bourgeois politicians in the Democratic Alliance (DA). The right and left errors of the PKP can also be traced to Comintern-Stalin orders, including the putschist “see you in Malacanang” plot in the 1950s.

In this sense, we must also have an unbiased appraisal of the role of the CPP during its split from the

PKP in 1968 when the leadership role was passed on from the latter to the former. The CPP's glorious moments was during this period in the late 1960s to the 1970s, when it was able to lead the student uprising that erupted in the now historic First Quarter Storm (FQS). The PKP-CPP split was needed to re-energize the left movement, especially the student movement, which was on the upswing since the 1960s. The CPP and the student base that it was able to recruit from the FQS formed what eventually became the main force that persisted in the anti-dictatorship struggle. However, the CPP eventually lost control of its leadership in the anti-Marcos movement, mainly due to its erroneous strategic framework of protracted people's war (PPW).

Despite its erroneous strategy, the revolutionary movement gained momentum in the urban areas. It was able to link up with workers in the factories and the people in the urban poor communities. This is the reason why many are saying that the CPP strategy was not really the classic and "purist" PPW but an adaptation of PPW, which allows the combination of guerilla warfare and mass struggles in the urban areas (also called "white areas").

However, the CPP's weakness was its failure to grasp the dynamism of the mass struggle and its excessive emphasis on the guerilla movement. This weakness became even more apparent when it failed to lead the anti-dictatorship struggle despite being the most numerous and potent force during the 1980s. Cory Aquino's faction of the ruling class was able to maneuver and wrest the leadership of the anti-dictatorship struggle from the forces that sacrificed the most during the dictatorship. With this, the revolutionary flow was reversed and the new ruling faction of the reactionary classes turned the situation into a counter-revolution against the progressive forces.

The failure of the CPP not only to lead the anti-dictatorship struggle, but to even foresee the collapse of the dictatorship through massive mobilizations became an issue of debate within the CPP. But the main issue that eventually led to the split of various CPP forces in 1993 was the absolutist and undemocratic method of leadership of the CPP center. It was also around the critique made by several forces against the document Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify the Errors which was drafted by Jose Maria Sison. The document was basically a reaffirmation of the Maoist line, starting from the concept of the semi-colonial/semi-feudal mode of production to the strategy of PPW and the problem of modern revisionism which was supposed to be the main factor for the collapse of the so-called socialist states.

The Rejectionist (RJ) forces which split from the party separately tried to pursue their own evaluation of the problem, including the CPP's ideological and political positions in a number of issues. Efforts to unify the RJs in order to renew the party and mount a new revitalized movement failed due to a number of reasons, including personality clashes and differences in views regarding party-building and a host of other issues. Even the main units which split from the CPP also suffered minor splits over time.

After 1993 and up till now, we have failed to unify our ranks. That is the main issue that we have to confront. We have failed to unify our ranks and form a strong force against the CPP. There have been attempts to merge, and a recent development is the merger of three parties into the Partido ng Manggagawang Pilipino (PMP) in 2002.

Is it a trend? Unfortunately I cannot say that it is a trend. The situation is really very much what it was before. The large part of Left forces continue to be divided; but there is hope for revitalization and renewal. One positive character of the Philippine Left is that we are still the strongest revolutionary movement in Southeast Asia. The Philippine Left may be divided but it is still intact. The Left has survived and it is still growing. Survival is an important quality of strength.

Stumbling Blocs

There are three stumbling blocks to revolutionary Left unity, renewal and revitalization:

- One is the lack of ideological and political clarity, including and especially on the questions that concern revolutionary strategy. We have not been able to come up with and unite around a potent strategy—strategy being our plan of winning—how do we win, how will we change the system, and how the workers and the poor will win and wield political power.
- Second is the persistence of old methods of work and old methods of thinking, not only within the CPP and groups that split from it, but also within other political forces.
- And of course, there is the very obvious and serious problem of sectarianism.

The first problem regarding lack of political clarity is related to our rejection of PPW and the need to mount a new strategy. This comes from the realization that the PPW framework was the culprit in limiting our capability to lead the anti-dictatorship People Power uprising in 1986, despite the CPP being the main Left force at that time—much more stronger than any other group, including the bourgeois opposition. According to the CPP, the error lies in the wrong appraisal of the situation. But the problem goes deeper than this. The problem is the PPW framework itself which is not intended for big mass mobilizations that would deliver the fatal blow to the dictatorship. Rather, mass mobilizations were only aimed at increasing the strength and forces for the armed struggle in the countryside.

I understand that there have been on-going discussions but we need clarity on this point. We might not achieve full unity at once; this is a process and the important thing is we are discussing and starting to develop a strategy. When we merged as the PMP the question of strategy was not settled, and up to now it is still not settled. We just talk about its components. We think we can continue to debate on these things; we just need to be open so that we can resolve the problem.

The problem here is Maoism. So we need to present viable alternatives vis-a-vis old concepts, especially those dealing with the strategy. There are now a number of groups that have begun to adopt strategies that are no longer within the PPW, but are in fact insurrectionary in character.

But the biggest difficulty is our lack of any clear alternative to the old CPP line, not only in terms of strategy but to the whole revolutionary program—on how to ensure its victory and how to create a far better social system.

Methods of Work, Methods of Thinking

On the second point, while many groups have already abandoned the Maoist and Stalinist line in the field of strategy and what we call as ND politics (which basically means the bloc of four classes approach in politics), old Maoist and Stalinist methods of work and thinking still exist and are still being used. An example of which is the conspiratorial approach in politics (sometimes even involving the bourgeois opposition or factions of the ruling class), lack of democracy and persistence of bureaucratic centralist methods in the organization.

I have experienced and am experiencing these. I know they exist in some organizations, and people have to confront this problem. We have the cliquish methods of operation and organization. There are political debates that turn into personal attacks and factional warfare instead of open political debates in the light of differences. We have to learn how to debate without it degenerating into factionalism and personal attacks.

There is also the refusal to test out new ideas, which is a sign of the old set-up. Some forms and methods of organization have never really changed, like the old CPP form; which is based on its militarist and underground character which is still with us and is continuing to create some problems within the organization.

Even what Ric Reyes referred to as the refusal to assess past errors and mistakes such as anti-DPA campaigns is also connected with the problem of perpetuating old Maoist and Stalinist methods of work and thinking. What is left to hide? Let us air the issues, let us apologize, and let us respond to the demands of the victims and relatives. Those who have left the Stalinist-Maoist CPP should be consistent in condemning the Stalinist-Maoist methods of “purging” and “cleansing the ranks” of the party and the revolutionary movement. Even now, the idea that the party can mete out death penalties to erring comrades and members still exist in some organizations that have left the CPP, or better still, have rejected the Stalinist/Maoist framework. What assurance, then, do we have that Olympia, Operation Kahos, Operation Missing Link, etc. will never recur?

The methods still exist and we have problems with these methods. It is true that the CPP is militarist, but there are revolutionary parties such as the Cuban revolutionaries and the Vietnamese Communist Party which did not resort to purging and cleansing of their ranks to get rid of unwanted elements in the party and in the revolution, despite intense debates in a number of issues and despite operating within a strict military context under different periods.

Problem of Sectarianism

The problem of sectarianism still exists within our ranks though the major problem mainly exists within the CPP which really does not want to unite with others since they alone possess the true line, more so if they are not in control. But sectarianism is also a problem among those groups which have left the CPP. Sectarianism takes the form of organizational sectarianism, which means not thinking and acting in the interest of the class as a whole, but in the interest of one's own organization.

The problems within our ranks consist mainly of turfing and turf protection. For a time, the political blocs served a purpose. But now, comrades need to band together. But the prolonged existence of political blocs is now becoming “problematic.” We have to ask, “why can't we unite?” There is no reason for us to maintain such a state. After all, what are our reasons for remaining fragmented into groups?

I shall quote some statements from the Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels.

“The communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties. They have no interests apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement.”

We should confront sectarianism, which means acting in the interest, not of the class as a whole, but in the interest of one's own organization. We have to understand that sectarianism has been a perennial problem of the working class movement too, as there are sectarian interests pertaining to sections, sectors and layers of the working class.

The formation of political blocs was a necessity, because we belonged to different groups that aim to relate with each other. But their prolonged existence, after more than a decade, is not a good sign. In fact this is becoming a fetter on the development of unity of the revolutionary ranks. It has become a perennial set-up. It's like a “we're here and you're there” arrangement. Isn't revolution a

unity of purpose, a unity of action? Development should be towards bridging this separation into blocs and eventually, their merger.

The polblocs as we know, which was a positive development in the 1990s, have become a fetter in unifying the Left forces today. The level of unity among polblocs has remained on a single-issue basis. The effort to have a programmatic unity has become a formal exercise limited to a conference. Beyond it, programmatic unity does not exist. And this is true even among groups in the polblocs which consider themselves revolutionaries (i.e., the method of struggle espoused is through revolutionary means).

The problem of sectarianism is also connected with the vanguardist tendency among groups claiming to be the party representing the class. It is also related with the thinking that the party will be the state, or performs the role of the state after the seizure of power from the bourgeoisie. If the revolution wins, then the party will sit in power. But Marx himself clarified that the party is not the state. As he wrote in the Communist Manifesto, "The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle for democracy."

Maybe we should speak out even now, and clarify that when a new government is formed, representatives of the working class will be there but the party will not be allowed to be part of that government. I think that is being tested in Cuba. The party is excluded from campaigning for government seats. This is a revolution of the class, not of the party.

While we reject vanguardism, there should be a party that would serve as the revolutionary political center of the working class. That is a concept of the party as a vanguard organization of the class. A revolution is centralized action and in centralized action, you have to have a political center. Many of the parties, which claim to be vanguard parties, do not live up to the name. A party is not a party by virtue of its name, its form and its rituals. This transforms Marxism-Leninism into dead forms and forgets its content.

We can learn from the Cuban and Venezuelan revolutions. The original Communist Party of Cuba was not the political center of the Cuban revolution. It did not do anything and in fact, it was useless. The role of the political center was taken over by Fidel Castro's forces; they became the party. The Communist Party of Venezuela is not the political center of the Venezuelan revolution. It is also useless. The role of the political center has been taken over by Hugo Chavez and the groupings around him. So the lesson here is that the party question does not end with the claim that we are the party. That has yet to be shown by actual political leadership, whether we represent the center of the revolution, or we're just one of those organizations and groups hovering in the political arena. At this stage, no one, not a single bloc, can claim to be the political center, or the party of the revolution today.

When you talk about being the communist party, that does not mean anything. You have to prove it by practice. If the communist party is not the actual political center of the revolution, it has to step aside when a real political center is formed. We have yet to build a political center. The political center is not the CPP. It is not us. It is not any grouping here. It has yet to be built. That is why we are talking here; maybe we can build something that will take over and do what some existing organizations, which claim to be the party, cannot do. And of course these organizations that claim to be the party have a lot to do to show that they have the capability to be the political center, because that is what matters, and it is something that you will prove by practice.

Another form of sectarianism is to reject or belittle lessons and gains of other revolutions. It is the beauty of Marxism that we have the tools to analyse these experiences. We have to look into several modes of revolution, without automatically rejecting them in favor of a grand model, and learning

lesson from them.

Leadership Problem of the CPP

Another problem that we have to look into concerns political leadership. Sectarianism is a problem that usually attacks the leaders of the movement, because at the grassroots level, workers and oppressed sectors know that they have to unite with the rest of the classes to gain victory. That is not the case with leaders, and the way they think. They are always like the Templars, the holders of the key, the keepers of the faith; they block everything because they think they should be the main persons there. This is also true regarding the CPP.

In our experience, it is easier to talk with CPP leaders in the mass movement because we have the same concerns and understand the need to have united forces in order to win battles. But the leadership is hopeless, starting with Jose Maria "Joema" Sison and the Tiamzon couple. With Joema, the problem is his character; but being a pragmatist, he can be persuaded to join a united front with other progressive groups, but they have to be cautious in dealing with him. With the Tiamzon couple, the problem is ideological. Their Maoism could develop into something like Peru's Shining Path.

That's why we should hurry up and put up a viable alternative to these people. At the same time, while saying that, I think that we should not close our doors to the CPP grassroots forces. While continuing to criticize CPP leaders, we should open up talks at the mass organization level where possible. I know it is hard because of "blood debts" but let us make a distinction between the bankrupt CPP leadership which should be held responsible for acts of violence and attacks against other groups and its military arm the NPA, on the one hand, and the CPP's mass organizations, on the other. I'm saying this because of the possibility of arriving at a modus vivendi.

Next Steps

What do we do now? First, we have to understand that there is no such thing as 100% unity or homogeneity, even if we decide to unite. The idea that the party should be 100% homogeneous is erroneous. We have to accept the fact that different views and even tendencies will exist in the same party and we have to be open to functioning inside a multi-tendency party, without political differences turning into factional warfare. Are we ready for this? We talk about plurality, but are we ready for an organization with multiple tendencies? That's one level of confronting the problems of the left. I know of experiences of other parties where they are testing this possibility.

There is a possibility for us to unite while continuing to respect the differences in our views. And there are situations where these differences might continue for a long time. For us that is hard to think of, but we have to look into this one area of development. Even if we manage to form a single party, I don't think we can have 100% homogeneity. I think the CPP will continue to split because the situation is, there will be different views, and they will struggle with each other. So if we have to unite and we have to form one organization, we have to be ready or open to the existence of several tendencies and prepare to deal with each other.

Connected with this idea that the party should be 100% homogenous is the idea that the Party center is the repository of correct ideas. This is a fallacy and a Stalinist view. In our debate with the CPP, the center said that we have to accept that it was the correct line just because the center said so. Instead, our emphasis should be in creating conditions for free and open discussion of issues towards achieving political clarity, especially regarding strategy, moving the struggle forward, and

developing a concrete strategy on how to win the revolution. That is still the agenda that we have to work on.

There is need for more open debates and discussions. There is a need to raise the level of debate and discussion from that of mere reacting to or interpreting events, to that of taking stock of the whole situation and pointing to the way forward.

Lastly, I would like this forum to continue; I would like this discussion to continue. I think we need a forum. I agree with what Ric Reyes said about building a socialist front, but I think that it might take time. I think what we can do right now is to come out with a regular paper or journal that tackles the issues that we're discussing today, and can be distributed on a wider scale. I think that perhaps, that is the next project that we can embark on.