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A Century of the Philippine Labor Movement

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A Century of the Philippine Labor Movement

Abstract

The Philippine labor movement is a social movement of workers and farmers led by middle class ilustrados and socialist intellectuals. The labor movement is composed of labor organisations like trade unions, farmers' associations, cooperatives, and other sectoral and people's organisations often called non-government organisations (NGOs). The trade union movement, while comprising only about 10% of the labor force, is the most organised and active component of the labor movement. The leaders of the trade union movement together with the intelligentsia form the middle class and the revolutionary intellectuals (communists, socialists, nationalists, etc.) are the traditional leaders of the labor movement.

Keywords

labor movement, Philippines

A Century of the Philippine Labor Movement

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[Editor's historical note. From 1565 to 1898 the Philippines were a Spanish colony. Following the Spanish–American War of 1898 the Philippines became a colony of the USA, which established democratic institutions with limited powers under an American governor with US military forces establishing a major base. In 1934 the US administration withdrew and the Philippines became a free 'Commonwealth', self-governing over internal matters, but subject still to American 'protection' and military presence. Following the Japanese invasion in 1941–42, the Philippines became a republic under Japanese 'protection'. After the return of the Americans in 1944–45 and the defeat of the Japanese, the USA granted full independence to the Philippines on 4 July 1946.]

Summary

The Philippine labor movement is a social movement of workers and farmers led by middle class ilustrados¹ and socialist intellectuals. The labor movement is composed of labor organisations like trade unions, farmers' associations, cooperatives, and other sectoral and people's organisations often called non-government organisations (NGOs). The trade union movement, while comprising only about 10% of the labor force, is the most organised and active component of the labor movement. The leaders of the trade union movement together with the intelligentsia form the middle class and the revolutionary intellectuals (communists, socialists, nationalists, etc.) are the traditional leaders of the labor movement.

The Philippine trade unions are mostly enterprise-based, located in Metro Manila and other urban areas and covers not more than 10 percent of the labor force. The limited coverage and scope of the trade union movement is caused by the limited growth of the Philippine industrial sector within a more dominant feudal economy. The history of Philippines trade union movement

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reveals 3 major features—communist infiltration and influence, government intervention and management domination.

Don Isabelo de los Reyes, the father of the Philippine labor movement, unified the movement in 1902 under the first labor federation, the Union Obrera Democratica (UOD) despite the continuing repression under the American colonial regime. UOD led by de los Reyes, Dominador Gomez, Lope K. Santos and Hermenegildo Cruz led to the creation of the Bureau of Labor in 1908 which recognised labor organisations. The labor movement then became part of the independence movement.

By 1930s, the socialist labor movement was firmly established with the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) (or Communist Party of the Philippines) of Crisanto Evangelista, of UOD and the Socialist Party of the Philippines (SPP) of Pedro Abad Santos, a Katipunero ilustrado leader captured by the Americans. (Aquino, 1967). The PKP and SPP merged during the war against the Japanese under the leadership of Vicente Lava and Pedro Abad Santos and resurfaced later as the Congress of Labor Organisations (CLO) after the war, led by Amado V. Hernandez, Guillermo Capadocia and Mariano Balgos.

The post-war era in 1953 featured communist repression and the period of collective bargaining. After the disbandment of CLO and the arrests of their leaders, non-communist labor organisations were organised under the Industrial Peace Act. Among these new federations were the Philippine Association of Free Labor Unions (PAFLU) of Cipriano Cid, Federation of Free Workers of Juan Tan, National Confederation of Trade Unions (NCFTU) and the Philippine Trade Union Councils (PTUC).

There was a resurgence of the communist underground movement with the establishment of a new Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in the 70s under Jose Ma. Sison. This led to the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 and later, the enactment of the Labor Code of the Philippines in 1974. The Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) became the labor center to represent labor in the tripartite system of labor relations in the country under the period of labor repression. Outside of TUCP however, Kilusang Mayo Uno (May 1 movement, KMU) was organised in 1980 by Felixberto Olalia, Cipriano Malonzo and Crispin Beltran (Scipes, 1996).

In 1986, during the post-martial law period, more progressive groups within TUCP joined a new labor center initiated by the Aquino administration called the Labor Advisory Consultative Council (LACC) which included the KMU. KMU later established itself as a labor center in 1998. Other groups like the FFW, Lakas Manggagawa Labor Center (LMLC), and the National

Confederation of Labor in the Philippines (NCLP) which included the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) also followed suit. On record, there are 164 federations and six labor centers at present. (Bitonio, 1999).

The Early Beginning, 1899–1903

Workers' organisations in the Philippines which included 'gremios' or community-based crafts unions began in Manila as early as 1870 among workers in printing, tobacco and stevedoring industries, clerks, woodworkers, carpenters and barbers (Scott, 1992).

In 1902, a nationalist newspaperman Don Isabelo de los Reyes, unified the workers' groups under the Union Obrera Democratica (UOD). De los Reyes was an intellectual who returned from exile in 1901. He also founded the Philippines Independent Church and headed a printers' union, the Union de Litographos de Filipinas y Otros Obreros. He learned unionism in Europe.

Trade unionism membership rose to 20,000 in Manila and environs. Strikes occurred and management representatives were threatened with assassination. As a result, labor leaders including de los Reyes were arrested and jailed for violation of the Spanish Penal Code.¹ De los Reyes was succeeded by Dr. Dominador Gomez who was also jailed. Lope K. Santos succeeded Gomez and he tried to legitimise UOD with the American colonial government by affiliating UOD with the American AFL-CIO. This resulted in the weakening of the trade union movement.

Trade Unionism During the Early American Period, 1905–1920

In 1908, with the UOD experience, the Americans legally recognised labor unionism through the creation of the Bureau of Labor. This ended labor union repression. Trade unionism veered towards political unionism and lobbied for nationalism, early independence and elections. This was the concept of political unionism that was advocated by de los Reyes, Gomez and Santos.

The Congreso Obrero de Filipinas (COF) organised by Lope K. Santos in 1913 was not very successful since their membership were mostly agricultural workers who were not qualified to vote. The voting rights granted to Filipinos in 1906 were limited to property owners and the literate. De los Reyes and Gomez were elected to the legislative body not because of the labor movement

but because of their being members of the Filipino upper class elites.

Rapid Growth of Trade Unionism And Communism, 1920–1935

The rapid growth of trade and related industries as a result of free trade policy imposed by the US led to the growth of trade unionism. Crisanto Evangelista, an original COF member, organised the Katipunan ng mga Anakpawis in 1929, and later, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP or Communist Party of the Philippines) in 1930.

Strongly influenced by Moscow's Marxist-Leninist philosophy, communism in the Philippines grew within the trade union movement. After the PKP was organised in 1930, the COF was divided into a communist and a non-communist group. Later the communist leaders headed by Evangelista were arrested and imprisoned for illegal assembly.

In the countryside, Pedro Abad Santos, a Katipunero major jailed by the Americans during the Filipino-American war, organised the Socialist Party among peasants and workers in Central Luzon and fought for agrarian reforms through radical and violent means. The social unrest posed by Abad Santos prompted President Manuel Quezon to adopt a social justice program in 1935 with the establishment of the Commonwealth. The Social Justice Program was calculated to win the support of labor since it included an 8-hour labor law, the extension of workmen's compensation, minimum wage legislation, the establishments of GSIS and legal protection of members of 'legitimate labor unions.' This program granted only minimum demands of the tenants and workers and preserved the basic character of Philippine society which is dominated by dynastic elites.

Period of Compulsory Arbitration and Political Unionism, 1935–53

The period 1935 to 1953 was known as the period of compulsory arbitration and political unionism. Compulsory arbitration under the Court of Industrial Relations meant the dominant and interventionist role played by the government in the labor-management relations. The system of compulsory arbitration under the newly established Commonwealth Government headed by President Quezon was aimed to weaken the radical labor wing

under the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP).

However, peasant unrest, World War II and the over-all economic difficulties created serious back logs in the cases being handled by the CIR. As advocated by the PKP, there was a shift to a radical and militant mode of settling disputes particularly in tenancy disputes (which accounted for most of the case back logs). This eventually led to the dominance of political unionism within organised labor.

a. Pre-War Period, 1935–1941

President Quezon's Social Justice program enacted new labor laws which led to the regulation of trade union activities and work stoppages were minimised. CA 103 created a Court of Industrial Relations (CIR) and compulsory arbitration was institutionalised as the mode of setting labor disputes. The Court of Industrial Relations was given the jurisdiction over labor disputes which were likely to cause a strike or lock-out which included more than 30 workers. CA 213 was enacted to provide greater legal protection to legitimate labor organisations. CA 213 provided for the following:

- made punishable intimidation or coercion with the intent of preventing a worker from joining a 'legitimate labor organisation'; and
- the regulation of a 'legitimate labor organisations' requires the investigation by the Constabulary of its activities.

In a bid to win the support of labor, President Quezon pardoned Crisanto Evangelista in 1938. The following year, 1939, the PKP of Evangelista merged with the Socialist Party of Abad Santos in order to strengthen its organisation with the coming of the 2nd World War. This led to the resurgence of communist activities in the Philippines labor movement.

The communist revolutionary intellectuals achieved a peasant base in Central Luzon where the Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon (HUKBALAHAP) was later launched during the Japanese Period. The communists also initiated a national labor organisation, the Collective Labor Movement (CLM) which later was split into two factions—the Confederate Worker's Alliance (Communist Wing) and the National Federation of Labor (conservative wing).

There were, therefore, two progressive elites that were leading the labor movement—the communist revolutionary intellectuals and the nationalists. The goal of the communists was to change the social order towards socialism, while that of the nationalists

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was complete independence from the USA. The communists took the upper hand in leading the labor movement because they were more skilled in agitation and organising which contributed to the strengthening of both the trade union movement and the labor movement.

b. War Years

Labor activities were suppressed during the Japanese occupation but the communists under the leadership of the scientist Vicente Lava were prepared. They channeled their efforts into guerilla resistance activities against the Japanese Imperial Army. Under the HUKBALAHAP, they established a merger with the socialist/nationalists (Abad Santos and Luis Taruc) and allied with the conservative Filipino dynastic and middle class elites (led by Quezon) and the American colonial administration (led by McArthur).

After the war, the communist-socialist-nationalist alliances became relatively strong particularly in Central Luzon region which led to the establishment of the political party Democratic Alliance, which successfully elected legislators to the Philippines Congress. They were, however, expelled by the landlord-dominated legislature.

c. Post-War Period

There was the resurgence of the communist movement within the labor movement from 1945–1950. The communists initiated the Committee on Labor Organisation (later Congress of Labor Organisations or CLO) which became the most dominant labor federation during the post-war era. Headed by Guillermo Capadocia, Mariano Balgos and poet-writer Amado V. Hernandez, the CLO usually reflected the stand of the Communist Party of the Philippines (PKP). In 1949, the CLO affiliated with the communist-leaning World Federation of Trade Unions and by 1950, it has 78 affiliate labor organisations and 100,00 members. The CLO assumed an aggressive and militant stand in bargaining for workers against management.

Top leaders of the PKP and the CLO were arrested in 1950. The Department of Labor cancelled the registration of CLO for being a communist front. Labor organisations and federations not run by communists disaffiliated with the CLO and those run by communists were divided due to stepped-up government surveillance and repressive activities.

By 1951, the mass-based segment of the labor movement

(peasant and agricultural worker based) was weakened considerably and organized labor became more concentrated in the modern sector of the economy. The trade union movement once more became urban based with membership coming from the industrial worker. The communists went underground with their military wing renamed Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB).

Non-communist segments of the CLO were reorganized under an environment of strong government intervention into trade union activities. Among the new federations were:

1. Philippine Association of Free Labor Unions (PAFLU, 1951) organized by Cipriano Cid, former president of CLO.
2. National Confederation of Trade Unions (NCF TU) organized by the under-secretary of Labor who later ran for Senate in 1953 and lost. This signifies the non-existence of a solid labor vote.
3. Federation of Free Workers (FFW, 1950) inspired mainly by the teachings of the Catholic encyclicals through Fr. Walter Hogan, S.J. and organized by young Ateneans headed by Juan C. Tan. (Asper, 2002)
4. Philippine Trade Unions Council (PTUC) which federated PAFLU, National Labor Union (NLU), Philippine Labor Unity Movement (PLUM), National Association of Trade Unions (NATU), Mindanao Federation of Labor (MLF), Taxi Drivers Federation, etc. It later affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

Collective Bargaining Era and Economic Unionism, 1953–1965

The labor movement's demand for less government and foreign (US) intervention in trade union activities led to the enactment of the Industrial Peace Act (RA 875 or the Magna Carta of Labor) in 1953. This new labor legislation was patterned after the US labor relations law, the Wagner Act, and was drafted with the aid of US labor advisers under the US Economic Survey Mission.

The Industrial Peace Act featured the following:

1. The requirements for registering a union are registration fee, Constitution and by-laws, sworn anti-communist affidavits of officers and copy of the last annual financial report of the union if in existence for more than 1 year.

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Unlike CA 213, these documents were accepted at face value and the government could not investigate the trade union activities.

2. Unfair labor practices (ULP) were defined, limited the power of the court over wages and working conditions, cases involving Minimum Wage Law, 8-Hour Law or those certified by the President as involving national interest and to issue injunctions in labor disputes.
3. Certification election was defined and supervised by the court to determine the exclusive bargaining agent and to establish the obligation to bargain collectively.

The Philippine IR system (or organised labor-management relations) now shifted to the collective bargaining process. Unions were characterised by 'rice and fish' functions (economic unionism). Their objectives were focused in bargaining for higher wages, shorter working hours, and better working conditions. The number of unions increased three-fold from 1953 to 1956 and collective bargaining agreements concluded increased by four times. From 1953 to 1966, the number of unions registered increased from 836 to 2,522.

To support the collective bargaining system in the Philippines and Asia, the Asian Labor Education Center (ALEC) of the University of the Philippines (now called UP School of Labor and Industrial Relations or UP SOLAIR) was set up in May 1954 by the National Economic Council (NEC) and the International Cooperation Administration (ICA), forerunners of the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) and the US Agency for International Development (US AID) respectively.

In 1959, the Katipunang Manggagawang Pilipino was organised to unify the fragmented trade union movement. It was a failure. In 1953, the Worker's Party was organised to field candidates for elections in Manila. Their candidates lost which once again showed the lack of solidarity in labor through a unified labor vote.

With the enactment of the 1963 Agricultural Land Reform Code, the trade union movement expanded its membership among agricultural workers in the regions. Farm workers were given similar rights to those enjoyed by the industrial workers, which include the right to self organisation, minimum wage, 8-hour work, social security, workmen's compensation and job security.

In 1965, another concept of labor unity was introduced with the formation of the Philippine Labor Center (PLC) by Democrito

Mendoza. This concept of one federation- one industry was patterned after the US system. The PLC started with 7 federations in the transportation, mining, communications and other industries. This concept, however, did not gain much ground.

Trade unions during the collective bargaining era were characterised as fragmented (presence of intra-union rivalries) and dominated by the lawyers or charismatic leaders. These factors contributed to a generally weak trade union movement in general and real gains for the working class were not effectively achieved.

Collective Bargaining Within the Framework of Compulsory Arbitration, 1965 to Present

Communist influence again became dominant during the world oil crisis of the '70s. During the mid-60s, the weakening communist movement was reinvigorated with the entry of young communist intellectuals and activists headed by Jose Ma. Sison of Kabataang Makabayan and a University of the Philippines faculty member.

Riding on a strong upsurge of student and youth unrest called the First Quarter Storm of the 70s, the young revolutionary intellectuals quickly influenced the trade union and peasant movements. A new communist leadership was set up in 1968 with the establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) under Maoist philosophy and later the New People's Army in 1969 under Bernabe Buscayno (Commander Dante of Central Luzon Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan).

The CPP-NPA initiated militancy and radicalism in the trade union movement and social unrest in the countryside. Using this among his excuses, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972 in order to 'save the Republic and reform society' (Asper, 2002). As a result, of martial law and the repression of labor's right to strike, the CPP-NPA gained more adherents and became stronger.

In order to win the support of organised and unorganised labor and to neutralise the inroads of the CPP-NPA and other critics of martial law, President Marcos decreed socially relevant legislation—the Land Reform Program of 1972 (P.D. Nos. 2, 27, etc.) and the Labor Code of the Philippines of 1974 (P.D. Nos. 442, 823, 849, etc.) The Marcos Land Reform Program initiated the transfer of lands planted to rice and corn under the Operation Land Transfer (OLT) program of PD NO. 27 which affected tenant farmers particularly in rice and corn producing areas in Central

Luzon, which is a hotbed of agrarian unrest.

The 1974 Labor Code of the Philippines (PD No. 442) which consolidated all labor laws in the country, encouraged and promoted trade unionism and free collective bargaining under the framework of voluntary and compulsory arbitration through the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC). Its real intent was to arrest communist infiltration in the trade union movement. Strikes and other concerted activities, which were the favorite weapons of the communists and other insurgents were banned during the Martial Law period. The collective bargaining process was merged with a system of arbitration or third party state intervention.

With a weakened trade union movement, the government initiated in 1975 the recommendation of the International Labor Organisation (ILO) for the unification of all labor organisations and federations under one center—the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP). With the TUCP, tripartism was somehow strengthened and now focused on state-initiated minimum wage legislation.

The post Martial Law period of the Marcos government from 1976 to 1984 marked a recessionary period as a result of a deepening debt crisis and massive graft and corruption in the government. Inflation and unemployment rates were exceptionally high and the economy registered the first negative growth in post-war history in 1984. In the meantime, the fragile trade union unity under TUCP broke down with the disaffiliation of various federations like the Trade Unions of the Philippines and Allied Services (TUPAS) of Bonifacio Tupas, United Lumber and General Workers (ULGW), Southern Philippine Federation of Labor (SPFL), Sandigan ng Manggagawang Pilipino (SMP) and the Philippine Transport and General Workers (PTGWO). (Ofreneo, 1989).

The first strike that defied the strike ban happened in 1975 in Manila at La Tondena factory. It was supported by a radical sector of the church, known in the underground as Bukluran ng mga Manggagawa. Later, a new labor center, the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU or May 1 Movement) founded in May 1, 1980, led nationwide strikes (kilusang welga) and protest movements against the Marcos government. Once again, the Philippine labor movement was transformed into a progressive social movement of various organised sectors- farmers, drivers, church and NGOs, youth and students, etc. There was a shift from economic unionism to political unionism during the 1983-1985 crisis years.

In 1986, there were massive labor unrest and protest actions in Metro Manila and other urban centers. This insurrectionary

event unified all anti-Marcos forces which included middle class human rights advocates and disgruntled military, religious, business and political leaders. It was called the People's Power EDSA Revolution and was preceded by a series of tumultuous events like the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr., the electoral 'defeat' of Cory Aquino and the discovery of the Enrile-RAM coup plot.

The ascendancy to the presidency of Cory Aquino in 1986 via a revolutionary government brought down the militancy of the trade union movement (Ofreneo, 1999). The Aquino administration initiated another labor center, the Labor Advisory Consultative Council (LACC) with the KMU. Furthermore, the militant civil society sector was drawn in to the Aquino administration through a democratic space that allowed limited reforms.

When President Fidel Ramos became President in 1992, the activities of the trade union and labor movements were back mainly to economic unionism—enterprise bargaining, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and legislative lobbying for social reforms and economic recovery programs. Political unionism on the other hand was further institutionalised with the appointment of labor sector representatives in Congress and in more tripartite bodies that were created. In the meantime, the World Bank-IMF structural adjustment programs implemented by all the post-Marcos presidents (from Aquino, Ramos, Estrada to Macapagal-Arroyo) ushered the Philippine economy to trade and investments liberalisation and globalisation.

The Future of the Labor Movement

Globalisation is bringing more threats than opportunities to the Philippine labor movement. There are several threats since globalisation brings in great changes in technologies which are characterised by 'jobless growth', labor flexibility, higher skill requirements and more machine intensive production processes. Job creation in the manufacturing industry subsector has declined and this is the traditional base of trade unionism. On the other hand, jobs are increasing in the services sector where organised labor is weakest. (Ofreneo, 1999 and Bitonio, 1999). Jobs are fast being casualised and contractualised thereby marginalising the existence of trade unions. Added to this, managements are becoming more pro-active and have become more receptive to union avoidance by competing with union in providing benefits to the workers.

The new trends and adjustments in the labor movement are summarised as follows:

1. There is a decline in labor militancy and strikes and trade unions are more cooperative with management in the implementation of adjustments measures toward enterprise productivity in exchange for gain sharing schemes.
2. The labor movement is promoting livelihood and labor entrepreneurship programs in order to create and/or promote jobs especially among workers in the non-core manufacturing and service industries and in agri-business enterprises and plantations.
3. There are renewed organising efforts in the government sector as a result of privatisation and in the informal sector.
4. Networking among civil society groups is enhanced for strengthened pressure politics and other forms of parliamentary struggles. The trade unions and other civil society networks have participated in the party-list elections in Congress and in local governance in accordance with the Local Government Code.
5. There are renewed attempts to unify the fragmented trade union movement through tactical alliances on national and local issues affecting labor.
6. There are renewed efforts in trade union organising among women workers as a result of the increasing labor force participation among women and among overseas Filipino workers (OFWs).
7. Strengthened institutionalisation of tripartism especially among moderate unions in government agencies and government-owned and controlled corporations (GOCCs) and other tripartite bodies.

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Notes

- 1 This Filipino word is a derivative of of the Spanish for 'illustrious', meaning distinguished or known. It refers to upper class Filipinos who were discriminated against by the Spaniards during the Spanish colonial period. The term referred to three types: firstly, the 'insulares' whose parents were Spanish but who were born in the Philippines, in contrast to the Spanish-born 'peninsulares' (Spain being a peninsula); secondly, the 'mesitzsos' born of mixed parentage, Spanish and Filipino, Chinese and Filipino, etc.; and thirdly, educated native Filipinos.
- 2 The Spanish Penal Code defined sedition to include 'any act of hatred ... upon a private or any class of persons.'