

Philippines: Unionists confront repression, build unity

Thursday 19 April 2007, by [BOLTON Sue](#) (Date first published: 12 April 2007).

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Manila,

Organisers from the Philippines' biggest left trade union centre, Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP — Solidarity of Filipino Workers) spoke to *Green Left Weekly's* Sue Bolton about the repression that they encounter from the state and their efforts to unify left-wing trade unions.

They told *GLW* that the impact of neoliberal globalisation had weakened all the union federations because of factory closures, downsizing and the replacement of full-time workers with casual workers on less pay.

But these aren't the only problems that union activists in the Philippines face. Over the last 18 months, harassment and repression by the military and its paramilitary offshoots have stepped up, with assassinations, disappearances, and military intimidation of communities and activists, such as union offices being invaded by the military in full battle gear.

The repression has affected all sectors — workers, urban poor and peasants.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has also introduced repressive new laws and dusted off Marcos-era laws. One example is the Calibrated Preemptive Response (CPR) executive order, which was introduced in September 2005. It is based on the old Marcos-era Law #880 "No Permit, No Rally". The CPR has been used to violently disperse demonstrations.

The BMP's treasurer, Michelle Canos, said that the largest number of political disappearances in the Philippines are of farmers involved in agrarian reform. However, trade unionists, including from the National Capital Region (Manila), have the second-highest number of disappearances.

BMP leader Filemon "Popoy" Lagman was the first prominent leftist assassinated since the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos ended in 1986. He was killed on February 6, 2001, shortly after Arroyo came to power.

Over the last 18 months, four BMP leaders have been killed. BMP general secretary Teody Navea told *GLW* that the military, in full battle gear, has been visiting factories in Metro Manila to "interview" workers, in an attempt to intimidate them into not joining the BMP or the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) labour centre.

The BMP and the KMU are the main left labour centres in the Philippines, with the BMP the largest of the two. Navea explained that the BMP was originally the National Capital Region chapter of the

KMU but it split away in 1993. This chapter had 80% of the KMU's membership when it left. The BMP became a national organisation in 1996, with chapters in Cebu, Ilo, Laguna and Negros. It mainly covers garment, metal, food and service workers.

Despite having lost a lot of members because of factory closures and casualisation, the BMP has managed to maintain a strong base while other labour federations have become very small.

Labour unity

Navea said that the BMP has a strong orientation towards building labour unity. He said that "in many areas, we [the BMP] initiate the formation of alliances to reach out to all other [labour] federations, all other [left] political blocs in the area".

Rosendo "Tindoy" Elola, the BMP's Negros region organiser, echoed this, saying that the "BMP is very active in supporting other labour organisations, the struggles of the other political blocs in the labour movement". An example was in 2004 when the striking workers from Hacienda Lusita, owned by former president Cory Aquino, were massacred. These workers were members of the KMU.

"The BMP is not a sectarian labour centre", explained Elola. "It commits to support all workers' struggles, as long as we unite around the workers' interests. The BMP led the campaign nationwide in support of the Hacienda Lusita workers. We staged demonstrations."

Canos described one militant action carried out by the BMP in support of the Hacienda Lusita workers — a very big mobilisation outside the department of labour. The workers went into the building and padlocked it, then went straight to the office of the labour secretary and demanded the abolition of the special power of the department secretary to authorise police or military intervention in labour disputes.

Socialist orientation

The BMP describes itself as a labour centre with a socialist orientation. This is important, Navea said, because "we want to empower workers to lead the struggle of the Filipino people for social change and not only for reform based on economic demands and the situation inside the factory". "We are giving a solid foundation of the workers' struggle, so that workers are aware that they need to lead the class struggle. It's very important because for workers to embrace the political struggle is for them to be socially conscious as a worker.

"We believe that as long as there's no unity among the workers as a class, there will be no real social change that will happen. The capitalists will remain dominant and will dictate what the life of the workers will be unless workers unite as a class."

Navea explained, "Our experience in the BMP is that those unions which are politically aware and where political education has been in place in the union, are the ones that are very active in the mass movements, in mobilisations, in most of our programs, in most of our political activities.

"So if you are able to organise socialist circles in one part of the factory, these are the people who will lead in the factory and propagate this political education among the members."

Canos explained that the basic unit of the BMP is not simply the union but the socialist cells that are organised in factories so that workers realise their primary role in effecting social change.

BMP president Leody de Guzman said that “the BMP isn’t only a labour centre, but is a political centre for workers as well. The Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, which used to be a puppet labour centre of the Marcos dictatorship, is also a political centre as well as being a labour centre. But it is a political centre for the conservative status quo.”

He said that “usually, the trade union centres in the Philippines confine their struggle to economic issues, to trade union issues, whereas labour centres like the BMP and the KMU also engage in political issues like globalisation and government policy.”

Alliances

Elola explained that “an important tactic of the BMP is consolidating our unions’ links with our community. That’s part of our political preparation for the working class, for them to be conscious of class unity ... That’s part of the political preparation so that when the economic crisis and the political crisis come, there are solid conscious elements of the working class to lead the class struggle to seize power.”

Canos said that the workers at the Gelmart garment factory are the most advanced with building alliances with the local community, so they received massive support from the community during a major strike in 2004. For example, the Gelmart workers organised medical missions for the community that lived beside the Gelmart factory. That meant that the local community helped with the barricades during the strike.

The BMP is also playing an active role in the “Oust Gloria” campaign aimed at removing the president. Navea told *GLW* that the BMP “was the prime mover in setting up a broad labour alliance for the ouster of Gloria called SULONG [Solidarity of Unions and Labour Organisations for a New Government]”. In addition, the BMP has played a major role in Laban ng Masa — “Struggle of the Masses”, a coalition uniting more than 100 left organisations.

P.S.

From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #706 18 April 2007.