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Ka Popoy Remembered: Inspiring Filipino workers 12 years after his death

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Friends and family commemorated the 12th death anniversary of Ka Popoy Lagman at the steps to Bahay ng Alumni in UP, where he was gunned down by still unknown assassins.

Mentioning the name Popoy Lagman will draw mixed reactions from people who know him or of him.

To those he led and influenced, he was maverick master of polemics who never minced words in attacking the political follies of his party and comrades. He was fear-inspiring leader of the Alex Boncayao Brigade (ABB), the dreaded Manila-based communist militia known for its vigilante operations against "enemies of the masses." He was also the tireless and feisty working-class leader who fought for socialism as an alternative to capitalism.

The man headed the communist movement in Metro Manila during Martial Law and later defected from the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) after rejecting its Maoist and Stalinist orientation. He then formed an alternative Marxist movement that put premium on the emancipation of the working class and the formation of a workers-led government. He was felled down by an assassin's bullet 12 years ago.

A dozen years hence, it is still uncertain who ordered his murder.

But for his close comrades at the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP), the labor federation he formed immediately after the split from the CPP in the early 1990s, who killed him does not matter anymore.

"Hindi makakamit ang hustisya para kay Ka Popoy sa simpleng paghahanap sa kung sino-sinong pumatay sa kanya (There will be no justice for Ka Popoy in the simple search for those who killed him)," explained Victor Briz, a long-time leader of BMP from Southern Metro Manila.

"Wala tayong inaasahang pagpupursigi mula sa ating gobyerno para makamit iyan. Ang tunay na hustisya para kay Ka Popoy ay makakamit lamang sa paglaya ng uring manggagawa (We cannot rely on any effort from the government to get that. The real justice for Ka Popoy will only be achieved in the liberation of the working class)," he said.

Here lies the Filemon "Ka Popoy" Lagman's indelible legacy in history: He fought for neither his personal nor organizational gains per se. He stood for the class interest of the Filipino workers, and the workers of the world in general. He was not content in merely serving the people, or fighting merely for the liberation of the Philippines from US imperialism, or even in simply toppling a corrupt and incompetent president only to be replaced by other members from the elite class. He pushed for socialism, a system wherein political and economic power lies in the hands of the workers.

Prescience

Despite being “abrasive, harshly polemical, and brutally frank” (as his close companions described him), and much to the chagrin of the Jose Ma. Sison-led CPP, Ka Popoy was a Filipino revolutionary with a profound ideological sharpness and sincerity. At the risk of being “disciplined,” including the penalty of death, he did not shirk from criticizing the dogmatic strategy and tactics of the CPP, and later the adventurist tendencies of the post-split ABB.

He may not have had the biggest number of followers in the Philippine Left, but history has proven that the political line of his bloc has been consistently correct and prescient. These included the participation of the Manila-Rizal unit of the CPP in the 1978 Interim Batasang Pambansa elections, when the CPP central leadership called for boycott; the participation of CPP-led forces in the first EDSA Revolution, when the CPP insisted on its militarist strategy; the campaign against economic globalization in 1990s which resulted in trade liberalization, labor contractualization, and privatization of key industries in the Philippines and which in 2007 resulted in the still-raging global financial crisis; and at the tail end of his life, the “Resign All” call in EDSA II at a time when everybody called for Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to replace the beleaguered Joseph Estrada.

Spending more than 30 years in the revolutionary movement, Ka Popoy’s prescience was founded not on whims but was a result of his vigor in mastering scientific socialism and dialectical materialism, his tool of analysis in assessing local, national, and even international situations. He did not parrot or copy-paste abstract dogmas and set them as solutions for all situations.

His ideological wizardry culminated in the publication of the Counter Thesis documents that unmasked the CPP’s dogmatic and unscientific and unrealistic program of protracted people’s war and the struggle for national democracy — a document that has never been officially answered by the CPP up to this day.

Renewal and redemption

Under Ka Popoy’s leadership, a new batch of activists were recruited to the Left after the split and a renewed call for radical change ushered in what Sonny Melencio, Ka Popoy’s long-time comrade and current chairman of the Partido Lakas ng Masa, termed as the “Second Period” in the Philippine Left.

This new batch, popularly called “Rejectionists” (or RJ, although the RJs would later further divide into more contending blocs), primarily defined themselves as revolutionary socialists, combined various forms of struggles and revolutionary tactics, and opened its doors to various forces in society, thus eschewing the sectarianism of the old.

After Ka Popoy’s death, the Philippine revolutionary movement may still be divided, and people may say that it has weakened, but the worldwide crisis of the capitalist order has worsened. As Ka Popoy predicted in 1999, “Globalization by its very nature transforms the economic turmoil in one nation into a world crisis.”

Despite the political ebb of the Philippine Left under the PNoy administration and the continuous backwardness of Philippine society, Ka Popoy’s forecast offers a word of hope for those who desire for systemic change to usher in a humane world: “The first decade of the new millennium will be the eve of the socialist revolution in the era of globalization.”

Currently, the socialist movement is gaining strength in Latin America, with the establishment of socialist-led governments in Venezuela and Bolivia, the popularization of Left politics in other Latin American states, and the increasing protests in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East against the bankruptcy of the rule of the 1 percent.

The struggle for radical change might be far from over, and Ka Popoy would never have the chance to witness what he called “the Armageddon of capitalism,” but for as long as the exploitation of the many by the elite few exists, Ka Popoy’s determination and tenacity for change will continue to inspire the powerless.

Merk Maguddayao

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* InterAksyon.com, The online news portal of TV5, February 10, 2013 7:04 AM

<http://www.interaksyon.com/article/54713/ka-popoy-remembered--inspiring-filipino-workers-12-years-after-his-death>

* Merk Maguddayao is a cultural activist with the Sanlakas bloc and a founding member of Laya Sining. The views he expresses here are entirely his.