

**Militant Labor in the Philippines, by Lois A. West.
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pp+.**

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The Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Movement, or KMU) was a federation of various labor unions that united on May 1, 1980 to pursue what it called a “genuine, militant and nationalist” labor movement. It also signified that the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) was ready for major changes in Philippine politics. Faced with unrelenting opposition and a declining international credibility, the Marcos dictatorship made its first major political concession by “lifting” martial law and allowing limited elections. The CPP, which had shown an extraordinary ability to survive the dictatorship in the countryside, was now in a position to make its presence known in the urban areas. The one urban “sector” that showed that remarkable ability to recover and then cope with martial law was the urban working class. Despite efforts by the regime and its trade union allies to frustrate radical organizing among the working classes, CPP activists had successfully established a foothold in factories and slum communities in the major cities. By the end of the 1970s, party expansion had been rapid, prompting the CPP leadership to push for the formation of larger umbrella and legal organizations. The KMU was one such organization. It was an “alliance structure” (p. 46) that was the product of painstaking activist work within different unions and in collaboration with non-CPP but leftwing labor federations.

How all this happened and what role the KMU played during the Marcos dictatorship and the post-Marcos regime of Corazon Aquino is the subject of Lois West’s book, *Militant Labor in the Philippines*. Her goal is quite ambitious. The book, as she puts it, seeks to look at the KMU in the 1980s “in terms of its continuing struggle over a reformist versus a revolutionary agenda.” She notes: “Because there has been so little written on the Philippine labor movement in the West, there is a need for more work to be done on the nature, character, and form of Philippine labor militancy. Because of its continuing militancy, analysis needs to place it comparatively in the global context.” West is not content with global comparison. She also adds to the broader perspective a “micro-level recording [of] individual voices, and recounting [of] events and histories of militant labor in the Philippines...as well as placing these events into a broader theoretical context” (p. 14).

One can follow the book’s story along the lines laid down by these multiple approaches. The first two chapters are mainly theoretical and comparative. Chapter One examines Philippine “social movement unionism” in comparison to other working class movements in Asia and the former Eastern European states. Chapter Two argues against culturalist explanations of Philippine backwardness, noting that the economic development programs of strategic elites were determinant in the degeneration of the Philippines into the “economic basket case of Asia.” The succeeding five chapters are Philippine- and labor-specific: the look at the social organization of the KMU; the role of women within the federation; the tensions between being militant, strike oriented and

revolutionary, and the political power of reformism especially in the Aquino period; and, the intricate relationship between the KMU and the CPP. The book closes with West's reflection on the splits within the KMU and the CPP. She also reminds readers that the United States, as the former colonial master, was as much responsible for perpetuating an inequitable social system having "left a legacy in the Philippines of the veneer of political democracy without the foundations of economic democracy" (p. 17). This legacy and the resistance to it "are most fundamentally affected by the globalization of economics and the effects of capital restructuring on militant labor movements" (p. 17).

West is one of the few scholars who witnessed the development of the KMU during a crucial juncture in Philippine political history. This alone would make the book singular and path breaking. But there is more. The importance of her book is doubled because the KMU was not just an open radical federation. It was also a prominent "legal" organization of the CPP. In a sense, this is one of the first books that allows us a glimpse of a working-class movement that had a dual personae: one that fought for workers' rights and joined the anti-dictatorship struggle *above-ground*, and another that was intimately connected to an underground, armed, struggle-oriented, and highly secretive communist party. The second persona had become more complicated of late when, in 1986, the CPP was plunged into its first major internal crisis after it was marginalized by the "people power" revolution that overthrew Marcos and installed Aquino to the presidency. Four years later, the party split into various factions, with the faction identified with party founder Jose Ma. Sison seizing the leadership and "reaffirming" the party's Maoist orthodoxy. This rupture reverberated throughout the CPP's allied and "legal" organizations. Unions that were identified with the party's powerful Manila regional committee broke away from the KMU and set up their own federation. Others followed suit, not so much because they chose sides but because they refused to be caught in the crossfire.

And here we encounter some of the book's internal tensions. Although her prolabor sympathies are quite clear, West also agonizes over the contradictory tensions within the KMU. On the one hand you have a labor federation whose commitment to the working class is paralleled by its exemplary antidictatorship politics. On the other hand, both class and political aspirations contained internal contradictions as indicated by the following practices: lapses into political instrumentalism as the CPP appears to direct the KMU to pathways that fitted its revolutionary goals rather than the interests of the Filipino proletariat; pervasive sectarianism towards non-CPP unions and other militant but moderate labor federations; a dominating patriarchy within the KMU where women's participation in the leadership have been limited; and, the breakup of the KMU into factions and ouster of anti-Sison leaders without the benefit of democratic debate.

Militant Labor in the Philippines tries to deal with these incongruities even as it attempts to situate the KMU and its politics on the progressive side of the Philippine political spectrum. It is successful to a certain extent. The KMU is one of the remaining resilient left-wing labor federations in the Third World. It still maintains a presence in present-day politics, especially when it comes to bread-and-butter issues. But the federation is also a badly splintered organization, with the faction-in-power becoming the most dogmatic and inflexible. West points out that these attributes bring back the "old questions about internal democracy in social movements and the role of a conceived 'vanguard'" (p. 16). Her discussion of these issues are quite sensible and I would only add the following thoughts as marginal supplement.

I would like to focus here on an aspect of the CPP's nature. The party was essentially the creature of a political setting that was extremely polarized between the dictatorship and its kleptocratic cabal, and the rest of a militarized civil society. This was, according to the CPP's founders, an "objective condition" that was "ripe for revolution" because the options were very limited. It was under this context that the CPP took root and flourished. The Left's growth--within less than a decade--was a remarkable feat given the repressive circumstances it confronted. Despite the constant loss of its top leaders to imprisonment or death, the CPP was able to successfully extend its presence throughout the Philippine archipelago (the first ever by any left-wing organization) and set up alliances and organizations among the urban working classes, the peasantry, and the student sector. When the KMU was formally established, its foundations were thus strong enough to weather state repression, for underneath its legal edifice was a potent and tenacious underground communist substructure.

But the very same condition that allowed it to grow, was also one that shaped its character. Martial law made the CPP accustomed to polarized politics. It came to believe that there was very little between the dictatorship and revolution. One was therefore either for the revolution or for the dictatorship, and woe to those who opted for a middle ground or proposed an alternative to Marcos not in consonance with the CPP's national democratic revolution. The CPP, in fact, accorded the same contemptuous treatment to its anti-Marcos rivals as it did the dictatorship, and in many instances it openly declared that unless a group totally adhered to its program, it would consider it as "reactionary" as Marcos.

Moreover, within the Left, the instrumentalism of vanguardist politics (as noted by West) was not the only problem. Using the repressiveness of martial law and the "demands" of hastening the revolutionary process as its justification, the CPP exercised tight control and demanded total conformity from its cadre corps. Although the CPP declared its adherence to the "democratic struggle," there was little democracy within it. Like many Leninist parties, the CPP demanded more centralism than democracy. Disagreements were resolved via organizational fiat (cadres and activists were reassigned or forced to resign) and not through debate and discussion. Deviations from the "general line," or autonomous actions were discouraged within the party and likewise the organizations it controlled or influenced. Internal democracy therefore never had a chance to take root within Filipino communism. Democracy was as alien to the CPP and its allies, as it was to the larger civil society under martial law.

By the 1980s, however, the political context changed and this had a major repercussion on CPP. Marcos was getting sicker and the dictatorship's power declining. While the Left continued to dominate the political opposition, new forces had emerged outside of its orbit. Moderate, urban-based and very middle class, this new opposition drew inspiration from the disenfranchised anti-Marcos elites and their new martyr, the assassinated anti-Marcos politician Benigno Aquino, Jr. (Mrs. Aquino's husband). By 1985, this "third way" (with Corazon Aquino as titular head) had challenged not only Marcos but also the CPP's political influence. In fact, it had successfully expropriated from the latter the "democratic discourse" and rechanneled a widespread anti-Marcos sentiment away from the CPP's revolutionary agenda to "bourgeois elections" as the principal way of challenging the dictatorship. The CPP still had the organized numbers and the firepower (the party's New People's Army had reached a record force of 24,000 fighters), but the initiative had shifted to its moderate rivals. After 1986, even these two assets were lost.

In short, the CPP's, and by extension, the KMU's upbringings were shaped by an authoritarian context. Both were born out of and became accustomed to the simplism of polarized politics. When that politics experienced a shift towards a more nuanced setting that was dominated by the ballot and not the bullet, the old habit became a fetter. The Party and the KMU found itself in an unfamiliar situation. When Aquino replaced Marcos, constitutional democracy also displaced the armed struggle. Like Marcos, the party was pushed into an unfamiliar terrain, and like him, it found itself in the political margins.

West devotes one chapter to the role of women in the KMU and confirms what many feminists criticize about working class movements -- the gender bias of their structures and practices. One question West has not addressed, however, was whether patriarchy is inherent in the KMU as a labor movement, or was a replication of gender relations inside the party, given the KMU's close links to the CPP. There is evidence that the two are interrelated. Since its formation in 1968, for example, the CPP leadership has always been dominated by men, with women mainly assigned to the less rigorous "finance work." This, however, is one side of the coin. At the other side, one sees male party leaders having their partners as unofficial advisers as is the case of Sison, the chairman-in-exile, and Benito Tiamson, the acting chairman based in the Philippines. Their respective spouses are said to wield powerful influence inside the CPP. Likewise, the CPP appears to take what it calls "the relations of sexes" more seriously than adversary institutions like the Church or the army. "Sexual opportunism" a crime which involved mainly men, has been made synonymous with selling out to the bourgeoisie and the imperialist. A 1983 internal party bearing the same title is explicit about protecting the rights of women to take the initiative in establishing relations, in allowing divorce within the party, and in imposing stiff penalties (including death) on crimes against women, especially rape. This is an area that demands more study.

The book also shows us very little of how a national labor movement like the KMU has responded to the globalization process. There is very little apparent discussion within the ranks of this radical movement on issues like ease with which global capitalist enterprises could readily shift their production processes from one country to the other when economics dictate or when the political environment becomes hostile to capital. Is it perhaps because KMU leaders, who are strongly influenced by the CPP's Leninism, may be content simply with reading Lenin. His ma, the Middle East, and East Asia, supplying cheap labor for a variety of services, from domestic work to accountants, from engineers to middle-level managers of various firms. In 1995, this labor force has funneled back to the local economy over \$3.6 billion in remittances, and is responsible for the Philippines being able to survive one economic crisis after the other since the last days of Marcos. The exclusion of this significant labor force in the KMU's economic and political calculations is quite surprising. Is it because the workers' altered economic standing (higher paid, when compared to local labor) diluted class contradictions, or is it because their transnational character (working abroad) created more puzzles than resolutions to the KMU's nationalist project? These are issues that one wishes the book could have covered.

West herself appears uncomfortable trying to keep an academic objective in a highly politicized circumstance. Her political sympathies, however, have not clouded her analyses. The book is not only a good addition to the rich literature on social movements dealing with transitions from authoritarian rule, it is also singular for being able to tell at least parts of the story of a labor federation whose substantial segment of its political life is lived in the underground.