The Philippine ex-left and the South China Sea

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As geopolitical tensions mount between China and the United States over the disputed South China Sea, the various parties of the Philippine 'left'—Maoists, ex-Maoists and Stalinists—have been exposed as lackeys of different sections of the local bourgeoisie.

In the early 1990s, several splits occurred within the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). These splits were driven by conflict over tactics; no principled difference existed between the various groups. All of them embodied the opportunism of petty bourgeois nationalism. Their subsequent political trajectory revealed that each represented the interests of sections of the Philippine bourgeoisie.

This evolution was not a break with their past but the logical extension of their adherence to the Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution, which holds that the tasks of the revolution in the Philippines are national-democratic, not socialist. As a result, they subordinate workers to one or other section of the bourgeoisie, which they falsely claim can play a progressive role in the throwing off of imperialism and the industrialization and democratic development of the Philippines. The two-stage theory has produced one disaster after another for the working class.

One of the groups which emerged from the splits of the early 1990s was Akbayan, which promptly entered the arena of parliamentary politics. The Communist Party's legal wing, the National Democratic Front, also began organizing its own political parties to campaign for legislative office, the most important of which was Bayan Muna. What differences exist between these groups lie in their alliances with different sections of the bourgeoisie. The dispute over the South China Sea very clearly demonstrates this.

In the lead-up to the 2010 presidential elections, each party reached an accommodation with a political representative of the Philippine bourgeoisie. Bayan Muna sought to ally with then-Senator Benigno Aquino, but he rejected their overtures and chose Akbayan instead. Bayan Muna turned to Villar, a candidate with real estate and infrastructural interests—a section of the Philippine bourgeoisie more closely tied to China.

After his election as president, Aquino increasingly aligned his administration on the interests of Washington. Akbayan is serving as the left front for his administration and is now increasingly promoting the interests of American imperialism, in a vulgar display of nationalist flag-waving and outright warmongering.

Under the leadership of one of its congressional representatives, Walden Bello, Akbayan introduced legislation to rename the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea in all official government documents. The legislation passed, the government renamed the sea, and the Philippine press adopted the new term with delight.

On July 20, Walden Bello led a delegation of four other representatives, including the other Akbayan representative in an unprecedented tour of Pagasa Island in the disputed Spratly chain, 480 kilometers distant from the westernmost Philippine island. Standing side by side with head of the Philippine military's Western Command, Lt. Gen. Juancho Sabban, Bello raised the Philippine flag, sang the national anthem and recited *Panatang Makabayan*, the Philippine pledge of allegiance.

Bello gave an odious, warmongering speech in which he stated "let there be no doubt in anybody's mind, in any foreign powers' mind that if they dare to eject us from Pagasa, Filipinos will not take that sitting down. Filipinos are willing to die for their soil." He pledged financial support for the modernization of the Philippine military and stated that the key to asserting Philippine sovereignty in the Spratly Islands was for congress to fund civilian settlements in the islands. He said he would promote an initiative to this effect in the legislature.

Bello compared China to imperial Japan in the lead up to the Second World War. Regarding the sharp escalation of US military involvement in the region and Aquino's appeal for US support, Bello stated: "I really can't blame these governments for taking this course of action. I blame China's aggressive behavior."

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Bello's virulent nationalism has taken on a racist tinge. He has openly called for the exclusion of Chinese Filipinos from the public debate over the South China Sea, so as "not to put them in the terrible position of having to choose between their country and their host country."

Having volunteered the blood of the Filipino working class on behalf of the political interests of US imperialism and sections of the Philippine bourgeoisie, Bello concluded his visit by going swimming. He told the press, "it feels like Philippine waters."

Walden Bello is the darling of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-radicals around the globe. Naomi Klein described him as "the world's leading no-nonsense revolutionary." His writings in the 1980s and 1990s on the World Bank, third-world debt, and politics of food distribution have garnered him a following—particularly among those associated with the World Social Forum and the eclectic anti-globalization crowd.

The sharp turn to the right taken by Bello and Akbayan is the necessary result of their allegiance to the sections of Philippine capital tied to the interests of US imperialism. It does not constitute the abandonment of their political commitments, but their logical development.

Bayan Muna and the other political groups with ties to the Communist Party of the Philippines allied themselves with sections of Philippine capital oriented toward China that attempt to downplay tensions in the South China Sea, so as not to cut across their business relations with Beijing.

Bayan Muna is no less nationalistic than Akbayan in its posturing on the South China Sea. For instance, it proposed that the Philippine government dispatch a flotilla of fishermen in small outrigger boats to the disputed islands as a demonstration of Philippine sovereignty there.

At the same time, Bayan Muna is critical of Aquino's obvious orientation to the United States and his aggressive stance on the South China Sea that threatens to upset relations with China. It has deliberately downplayed the danger of conflict in the South China Sea, advocating that tensions be resolved through negotiations between China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Carol Araullo, head of the umbrella organization BAYAN, of which Bayan Muna is a part, wrote in an article on July 8: "there is no imminent danger or immediate possibility of any armed confrontation between China and the Philippines, with or without the US." One week later, Bayan Muna held a press conference in which they asserted that the United States would not militarily aid the Aquino administration, in the event of a conflict with China in the South China Sea.

In fact, Bayan Muna is deliberately lulling working people in the Philippines into a false sense of security. Under pressure from the Aquino administration, Washington has tacitly acknowledged an obligation under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to come to the aid of the Philippines in the event of a conflict.

Neither Akbayan nor Bayan Muna has any connection with the urban and rural poor. There is a fundamental class divide between them and the working class. They represent the interests of the Philippine bourgeoisie and provide its various sections with "left" credentials.

The only alternative to the machinations of the American, Chinese and Philippine ruling class is the independent struggle of the international working class for socialism. As Trotsky made clear in his Theory of Permanent Revolution, in countries with a belated capitalist development, such as the Philippines, the national bourgeoisie cannot achieve the goals of the bourgeois democratic revolution. These can be achieved only through a revolution led by the proletariat with the support of the peasantry that establishes a workers' state and initiates not only democratic, but also socialist measures. They cannot be completed within a national framework, but only as part of a broader international movement of the working class and oppressed.

The interests of the proletariat are inimical to those of the bourgeoisie. To subordinate the workers to any section of the bourgeoisie is to prepare colossal defeats for the working class. To defend its interests, the working class in the Philippines must organize itself independently of its bourgeoisie and join the international struggle for socialism by building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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