

# Twenty-five years since the Mendiola massacre in the Philippines

Joseph Santolan  
23 January 2012

Sunday marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mendiola massacre. On January 22, 1987, 17,000 peasants, workers and students marched across Mendiola Bridge in Manila toward Malacañang presidential palace to present their demands for land reform to President Corazon Aquino. They were blocked by anti-riot personnel in civilian clothing; a unit of the Philippine Marines; and police forces. Without warning, these forces opened fire, training their M16s on the unarmed protesters. The firing continued as the demonstrators fled in every direction. Thirteen peasant marchers were killed, and nearly 100 wounded.

Mendiola is at the dense urban heart of Manila. The university belt along Recto Avenue, the hot bed of student protest since the 1960s, ends here. The presidential palace on the bank of the Pasig River sits at the other side of the bridge. Protests, marches, demonstrations always cross here.

Several journalists were able to capture video footage of the event, some of which can be viewed here [[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOMHI9\\_vkY4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOMHI9_vkY4)]. Numbers of protesters dashed back into the street, braving continuing sporadic fire, to recover the injured and the bodies of the dead. Those shot were laid across the hoods of jeeps and driven to hospitals. Mendiola was a vacant street lined with bullet shells, discarded placards, bloodstains, and tsinelas—the rubber sandal footwear of the poor.

The day after the massacre, President Corazon Aquino ordered the creation of the Citizens' Mendiola Commission, headed by retired Supreme Court Justice Pedro Abad Santos, to investigate the event. The commission and subsequent judicial hearings were a whitewash. Twenty-five years after the massacre, no one has been charged with a crime. The families of the victims have not received a centavo of compensation.

President Aquino came to power in the aftermath of fraudulent elections conducted by the Marcos dictatorship in February 1986. A military coup, the machinations of the leadership of the Catholic Church and a mass protest movement provided the basis for the ousting of Marcos. The US withdrew

its backing for Marcos, and declared support for Aquino. She was installed as president.

Her first year in office was marked by a fragmentary and tense alliance of hostile forces within her administration. The military officers whose coup brought her to power were looking for an efficient system of promotion within the military and a crackdown on the Maoist Communist Party and on the working class.

Aquino had the backing of all the oligarchic families who had been excluded from power during the Marcos regime. They looked for the restoration of their property and political power.

Aquino had also received support from members of the urban middle classes who desired a technocratic role within an efficient, Western-style democracy, free of graft and corruption. And she had the backing of the legal front organization of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the National Democratic Front, which in April 1986 declared its 'critical support' for Aquino.

This coalition broke apart in increasingly hostile confrontations. Disaffected military officers engaged in seven coup attempts, each increasingly bloody.

In response, Aquino shifted her government sharply rightward. She backed the creation of paramilitary anti-communist groups, armed bodies of thugs known as CAFGUs (Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units). These paramilitary vigilantes engaged in harassment, terrorism, torture and murder, all under the auspices of official anticommunism, and funded by the Philippine military. Aquino notoriously labeled the CAFGUs "an example of people power."

With Aquino's lurch to the right came a systematic crackdown and use of violence against the working class and peasantry. On November 12 1986, labor leader Rolando Olalia was murdered by military forces. The Mendiola massacre followed in January.

Corazon Aquino was a member of one of the largest landlord families in the Philippines. The burning issue of land reform revealed Aquino's class allegiances most clearly. She engaged in a series of half-hearted gestures, which culminated in the misnamed Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). Large landholders easily avoided the redistribution of their land to tenants under this law by either reclassifying their land as commercial or industrial land, or by changing the ownership of the land to joint stock ownership and distributing small portions of the shares to the tenant farmers.

It was precisely these landed interests that the police and military, who sent their bullets into the defenseless bodies of protesters, were defending.

The police forces at Mendiola Bridge were under the command of Brigadier General Alfredo Lim. He is responsible for the shooting of the marchers. No charges were filed against him. From head of police, Aquino promoted him to head of the National Bureau of Investigation. Lim won the office of Mayor of Manila in 1992 and 1995. During his term in office, the bodies of suspected drug pushers and petty criminals would routinely be found murdered and their bodies disposed of in side streets or canals. He was a one-term Senator in 2004, re-elected Mayor of Manila in 2007 and is currently serving his fourth term.

Equally culpable in the massacre are the criminal policies of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its front organization, the National Democratic Front (NDF). From its declaration of critical support for the Aquino administration in early 1986, the CPP led the working class and the peasantry to form a 'united front' with their class enemies, the bourgeoisie and large landlords.

In July 1986, *Ang Bayan*, the official organ of the CPP, stressed that a national united front was "just as indispensable as the armed struggle in winning total victory." This position is the necessary outcome of the central premise of the political line of the party, the 'bloc of four classes.' The CPP was calling for class collaboration with the national bourgeoisie under the leadership of President Aquino.

As Aquino moved sharply to the right, the CPP continued this policy, defending President Aquino and hiding her role as the center of state violence and reaction and bourgeois rule.

When Rolando Olalia was murdered and a protest strike was called, NDF leader Crispin Beltran announced, "The strike is supportive of President Aquino. It is directed only at a small group of ultra-rightists out to destabilize the government."

When the January 22 march on Mendiola was announced, the head of the NDF's umbrella organization Bayan, Lean Alejandro addressed an open letter to Aquino that the groups were "marching back to Malacanang today to meet Your Excellency in a dialogue and to define effective resolutions to the people's demands." Some of the placards in the march called for land reform from "Cory, our hero."

The peasants and workers who marched across Mendiola Bridge had been ideologically disarmed before their class enemy. The CPP had summoned them to form a 'united front' with the Philippine bourgeoisie, whose leading representative, Aquino, coldly and dispassionately sent troops who fired upon them.

In the aftermath of the massacre, the leadership of the CPP, reluctantly and by split vote, broke off peace negotiations with the Aquino administration.

Corazon Aquino, the person most responsible for the bloody murder of the protesters, died in August 2009. The leaders of the National Democratic Front and the CPP tripped over themselves to deliver eulogies for this bitter enemy of the working class and peasantry.

Joma Sison, lifelong head of the CPP, wrote, "Corazon Aquino was an outstanding and inspiring figure in the anti-fascist alliance against the Marcos dictatorship." The Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), the CPP's organization of labor unions, wrote: "She died as an ally of the Filipino people... [She] was part of the historical display of the power of the Filipino people's unity ... Today we are called upon by history to create the broadest unity to continue the unfinished task of fighting for genuine democracy and social change."

The working class and oppressed masses of the Philippines should draw the necessary lessons from the Mendiola massacre. The call for "the broadest unity" is a repetition of the CPP's program of class collaboration and the preparation for new tragedies. Workers can defend their basic rights only through a complete break from all sections of the bourgeoisie and the various Stalinist apologies and the launching of an independent struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies. That requires the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, in the Philippines.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**