

The “Workers Party” and the sell-out of Philippine Airlines workers

Joseph Santolan, Dante Pastrana
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The Partido ng Manggagawa (PM, [Workers Party]), a pseudo-left organization composed of Philippine trade union bureaucrats and ex-Maoists, is carrying out the systematic betrayal of striking airline workers. Under the auspices of the Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA) union, PM has gone, hat in hand, to the offices of President Benigno Aquino, the Philippine legislature, the Supreme Court, as well as the annual stockholders meeting of Philippine Airlines, pleading for concessions.

Last week, PALEA travelled to Washington to beg the White House office of the US Trade Representative to intervene on their behalf with the Philippine government. PALEA requested that the office of the Trade Representative pressure Philippine President Aquino to, in turn, pressure Philippine Airlines owner Lucio Tan to grant PALEA employees concessions.

The president of PALEA is vice president of PM. PM fraudulently styles itself as “an independent working class party” fighting for “the emancipation of the working class from capitalist exploitation and wage slavery.” PM’s founder, Filemon ‘Popoy’ Lagman, claimed to be ‘a Leninist’. The treachery and mendacity of the PALEA trade union leadership, prostrating itself first in the offices of the Philippine bourgeoisie and then in the headquarters of US imperialism, is not the result of the perfidy of PM’s current leadership and the abandonment of their heritage. It is the continuation of the role which PM’s leadership has played for decades: defusing workers’ struggles with a calculated policy of class collaboration.

In September 2011, 2,600 Philippine Airlines (PAL) employees went on strike in protest of impending layoffs. They were fired by the company and replaced with contractual workers who were paid half their wages and who received no benefits. The fired PAL employees set up a protest camp outside Philippine Airlines offices at Manila’s Terminal 2 and have been picketing round the

clock for the past four months.

When the workers went on strike, the PALEA leadership claimed that it was no more than a protest action, not a strike. When PAL fired the workers, the union secretary-general issued this statement: “We will go back to work while waiting for the Supreme Court to rule that outsourcing is illegal. If the court declares otherwise, then we will abide by the law and comply with the third employee agreement.” PAL refused to take the workers back.

While workers lived on the picket line, the union leaders went on a circuit of government offices, pleading for the workers to be reinstated and pledging PM’s support for President Aquino. They were rejected out of hand. They turned to the PAL stockholder meeting, where Gerry Rivera, the vice president of a party claiming to be dedicated to the ‘abolition of wage slavery’, pleaded: “We have sacrificed our collective bargaining rights for 13 long years since 1998 and it is unjust for PAL to reward us with retrenchment for it. We appeal to management to craft a business model that does not include outsourcing jobs.” They were again rejected.

The appeal to the Obama administration and office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) is but the continuation of this grovelling behaviour. PALEA representatives asked the USTR to suspend the preferential tariff rates granted to Philippine exports under the US Generalized System of Preference (GSP).

The USTR is currently conducting a review of the Philippines eligibility under the GSP. The review was triggered by a petition lodged by the International Labour Rights Fund (ILRF) in 2007. The ILRF, which is manned by Democratic Party operatives, trade union bureaucrats and pseudo-radicals, accused the Philippine government of failing to “afford its workers internationally recognized workers’ rights” required under the GSP eligibility and called for the suspension of GSP benefits.

According to the PALEA statement, Gerry Rivera, the PALEA president, “testified ... on the suppression of labor rights by the Philippine government.”

The ILRF itself admitted, in a 1995 report, that granting GSP rights subject to a review of labor relations was nothing more than a whip employed by Washington against regimes that were failing to follow the dictates of US imperialism.

The trajectory followed by the leadership of Partido ng Manggagawa over the past three decades, from membership in the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) to the antechambers of the White House, is instructive.

PM has its origin in sections of the leadership, during the 1970s and 1980s, of the Manila Rizal Regional Council (MRRC), the national capital section of the CPP. Under the auspices of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), the trade union umbrella front organization of the CPP, these sections of the MRRC had a dual function. They were trade union functionaries, negotiating concessions from management on behalf of striking workers, and they were members of the CPP, who directed the most class conscious and advanced layers of the working class to leave the cities and join the petty bourgeois-led armed struggle of the New People’s Army (NPA) in the countryside. Both faces of this dual role were designed to defuse class conflict in the cities and to redirect workers away from an independent political struggle against capitalism.

In the early 1990s, in the face of the CPP’s political crisis produced by both the downfall of the Marcos regime and the collapse of the Soviet Union, large sections of the MRRC split from the party. Those associated with the KMU and trade union activity formed Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP [The Philippine Workers Movement]). The BMP worked as a trade union organization to rival the KMU. Out of BMP a political party formed, Sanlakas, which was able to get a representative elected to the Philippine congress in 1996: Renato Magtubo.

Sanlakas and BMP traded on their left cachet, endlessly citing and misquoting Lenin in their materials. Magtubo’s speeches before the Philippine legislature, however, revealed that Sanlakas was engaged in the same policies of class collaboration as KMU.

His privilege speech to the legislature on November 8, 1999 is representative: “I appeal to your sense of justness and fairness: not for a just wage or a fair price for the labor of an ordinary workingman which, I grant, is a

luxury our country cannot afford. All I am asking is to pay the average worker the value of his labor power and redeem for all workers the lost value of their wages eroded by price increases ... I am aware that I have antagonized the sensibilities of many of you in my prior privilege speeches. I extend my sincere apologies. But I pray and I plead.... [A]mid the complexity of economics, one simple truth stands out: A happy worker is a hard worker. This is the key to economic progress and social justice. Let us give our workers a Merry Christmas, and they will work hard for our country in the coming millennium. Mabuhay ang Uring Manggagawa! [Long live the working class!] Thank you, Mr. Speaker.”

BMP split into several groups in the early years of the last decade, for reasons that were never declared. Magtubo became the president of PM and continues to fulfil this role.

PALEA and Partido ng Manggagawa have continued the same policies as their predecessors in the KMU and BMP: they have given the class collaborationist policies and betrayals of trade unionism the thin glaze of pseudo-radical rhetoric.

While the Philippine Airlines workers lived and suffered on the picket line, the union leaders have acted with criminal lightmindedness. When corporate goons in late October physically assaulted the picket line with clubs and rocks, PALEA mounted no defense but issued a statement denouncing PAL for ‘haunting’ the employees, and called for a “PALoween protest”.

The behaviour of PALEA and PM leaders is not an aberration but is another manifestation of the treacherous role which the trade union bureaucracies and ex-lefts are playing in the Philippines and the world over, negotiating wage-cuts and layoffs on behalf of management and actively engaged in the suppression of workers’ struggles.

To defend their interests, the striking PAL workers must break with PALEA and organize themselves independently into rank-and-file committees. These committees must join with other sections of the Philippine working class and with the working class internationally in the struggle to build a movement political independent of all sections of the bourgeoisie to fight for socialism.



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