

Philippines: Maoist union leads Tanduay contract workers toward defeat

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More than 200 contractual workers are waging a desperate struggle to regain jobs at a plant of the Tanduay Distillery Inc., in Cabuyao, Laguna, 47 kilometers south of the Philippine capital of Manila. The corporation, owned by Lucio Tan, a billionaire and the country's second wealthiest individual, sacked the workers on May 18 in a callous move to head off their bid for regularization.

The retrenched workers are among 397 who have been employed for years, some more than a decade, under labor-only contracts with Global Skills Providers Multi-Purpose Cooperative and HD Manpower Service Cooperative. These so-called labor cooperatives have close ties to Tan and with the mayor of Cabuyao. More than 80 percent of the Tanduay work force nationwide are contractual employees.

Contractuals have no security of tenure, lack benefits including medical insurance and paid leave, and more often than not do not receive the legally-mandated minimum wage.

While this practice is ostensibly illegal, the relevant regulations are riddled with exceptions. And with the direct connivance and neglect of various state organizations, including the labor department, the regulations are rarely enforced.

The push to end regularization is the common program of the ruling class. Since the downfall of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and the restoration of formal bourgeois democracy under President Corazon Aquino, government and employers have waged a relentless assault on regular workers across all industries, retrenching and rehiring thousands as contractuals.

To cite one example, in 2011, Philippine president Benigno Aquino III and his labor department secretary, Rosalinda Baldoz, rammed through the de-regularization of the ground staff of Philippine Airlines. More than 2,500 were sacked, only to be rehired later as

contractuals. As a result of this process, an estimated 70 percent of all workers in the province of Laguna are contractuals.

The Tanduay workers have shown militancy and determination in fighting to defend their jobs. They have withstood the repeated attacks of company guards and thugs on their small picket set up at a gate of the Asia Brewery Compound, which houses the distillery plant. However, they face impending defeat, which is being facilitated by the Maoists of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its front organizations, particularly the trade union federation Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU).

The KMU's entire political strategy is bent on preventing any independent struggle by the working class and subordinating workers to the state—a recipe for disaster.

On April 18, the KMU instructed the Tanduay contractual workers to register with the labor department as an association, under the name Tanggulang Ugnayan Daluyang Lakas ng Anakpawis sa Tanduay Distillers Inc. (TUDLA). They then instructed TUDLA to request an investigation of “violations of labor standards” and safety standards in the plant.

The local labor department went through the show of investigating the violations, about which everyone already knew, and reported on May 5 to the management of the Tanduay distillery that they lacked the legal cover to convincingly assert that they were not in violation of the labor code. The labor subcontractors attempted with paperwork to create a veneer of legality but met resistance from the contractuals workers.

On Friday May 16, the management informed the 200 contractual employees of TUDLA not to show up for work on Monday May 18. The local labor department released its official findings to the sacked workers on May 27, blandly assuring them that Tanduay would be forced to regularize them if a legal decision was handed down

against the corporation.

KMU hailed this announcement from the local labor department, which is a sham, as a “small victory.” On average, legal proceedings in the Philippines involving labor disputes take eight years to wind themselves through the justice system before finally reaching the Supreme Court.

The workers of TUDLA will be starved out long before a decision is reached. Anse Are, who is regarded as the leader of TUDLA, has worked for six years on the production line on Tanduary where he earned barely over \$US8 a day to support his wife and three children.

In a phone interview with the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Are admitted, that without a job, “The incoming school year is really a problem to us. We don’t know where to find money for my children’s tuition as I am also supporting two other nephews in the province.”

The workers of TUDLA are living on a makeshift picket line, under a thin tarpaulin shelter. They have lost their jobs, and have no money for their families. Even if a decision is eventually handed down in their favor, they will have been scattered. Hundreds of lives will have been destroyed. There is no victory here.

There is no doubt that the workers of the Tanduary distillery fought courageously. But to win their struggles, workers need more than courage and militancy. They need a political perspective that expresses their interests. The program of the KMU exists to defend capitalist interests. The first step toward a genuine victory for workers in the Philippines, including those at Tanduary distillery, is to break with the KMU, the establishment of an independent rank-and-file organisation and the turn to workers throughout the Philippines and internationally who face similar attacks. Such a struggle can only be based on the political fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government in the Philippines as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.



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