

Student strikers in the Philippines demand government action on COVID-19 and typhoon devastation

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Students at a number of leading universities in the Philippines are organizing academic strikes to demand that the national government adequately respond to the calamity caused by multiple recent typhoons. University administrations have responded by suspending all classes for a week, but the demands of the students are growing and taking on a more directly political character.

The Philippines, already dealing with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been battered by a series of massive typhoons. The most recent, Typhoon Vamco, left a trail of devastation. The province of Bicol was ravaged and the northern province of Cagayan remains submerged. The city of Marikina in Metro Manila was likewise subject to massive flooding, and its densely populated streets are now clogged with thick mud and debris.

Sixty-nine people have been reported dead as a result of the typhoon, a number that will doubtless rise, 22 of them in Cagayan. The flooding of Cagayan was a result of the release of water from Magat Dam to preserve the structural integrity of the aging facility.

Cagayan occupies a critical agricultural plain. The flooding has destroyed the region's crops, which will produce massive economic dislocation for the farmers in the province and a sharp rise in food prices throughout the country.

More than 15,000 students are currently housed in evacuation shelters in eight regions throughout the country in the wake of the typhoon. Classes are being conducted online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even without the devastation wrought by the typhoons, the country's dilapidated infrastructure and social inequality have made participation in classes

nearly impossible for many young people. The situation has now become completely untenable.

The administration of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte responded to the typhoon with callous disinterest. For days, the president held no press conferences. His only public statement was a stupid remark that he wished he could go outside to swim but that his security would not let him.

The phrase #NasaanAngPangulo (where is the president?) began trending on social media. A spokesperson at the Presidential palace issued an instruction to reporters to stop asking "where is the president?"

On Monday, Duterte finally held a press briefing in which he occupied his time largely with telling sexist jokes. There were too many women in the province of Bicol, he declared, and local officials did not adequately respond to the typhoon because they were spending all of their time having sex. He went on in a similar vein.

The calls for a student strike originated on November 14 at Ateneo de Manila University, an elite religious university and one of the most prestigious in the country. The students wrote a petition, which they circulated online to the student body, declaring that they would withhold submission of school requirements until the "national government heeds the people's demands for proper calamity aid and pandemic response."

They stated: "We believe that things cannot continue business as usual. We can no longer stomach the ever-rising number of deaths due to the state's blatant incompetence. We cannot prioritize our schoolwork when our countrymen are suffering unnecessarily at the

hands of those in power.”

The petition declared, “We cannot sit idly by and do our modules, ignoring the fact that the Philippine nation is in shambles,” and concluded, “The national government must act now or step down from their positions. No compromises.”

Within 24 hours, nearly 600 students had signed the petition. It articulated the sentiments of a significant section of university youth throughout the country and within a day there were similar strike petitions circulating on a number of campuses. Students at La Salle, another elite religious school, announced their intent to strike, demanding that “either the national government act or step down.”

Students and faculty at the University of the Philippines Diliman, the flagship state university campus, staged a rally and announced plans to strike as well. The number of petitions and strike announcements grows on a daily basis.

Looking to stem the growing movement, presidential spokesperson Harry Roque issued a cynical threat to the Ateneo students that they would fail their classes and not be able to graduate. “If you don’t meet the academic requirements, you will lose your future, you won’t graduate from Ateneo,” he warned.

A number of university administrations have responded to the strike statements by issuing a one week suspension of classes, hoping that by the time they resume, some of the immediate problems might have been resolved and the stoppages would disappear. Classes at Ateneo have been suspended and the strike delayed until November 23.

Rather than backing down, the students have escalated their demands. Recognizing that they had become the central focus of a growing national movement, the students at Ateneo redrafted their strike declaration yesterday evening to incorporate specific political demands. These include the implementation of “free COVID-19 mass testing and proper contact tracing,” the “guarantee of safety, support and funding of local health workers,” the “cessation of military-centric solutions to medical problems,” the “reallocation of Intelligence funds towards relief operations,” aid measures for those affected by the typhoon, and demands for a “no fail” policy from university for all striking students.

They concluded that they would spend their time on

strike organizing relief operations and protesting against the Duterte administration.

The student government of Ateneo de Manila University will be voting on the strike petition this afternoon.

Mass student strikes have a long history in the Philippines, and have often been the first indication of the eruption of broader social conflict. The social ills denounced in the petitions circulated by the students of Ateneo and other campuses are fundamentally the product of capitalism, and not simply the incompetencies and corruption of any particular administration. If the student strikes grow, there will be moves on the part of sections of the elite and their political operatives, to channel the unrest behind the removal of Duterte and the installation of Vice President Leni Robredo. The mass student strikes of 2000 were similarly diverted behind the installation of Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who proved to be every bit as repressive and tyrannical as her predecessors.

Robredo, chair of the Liberal Party, represents the interests of Filipino capitalists who are closely tied to Washington and who oppose Duterte’s reorientation of Philippine foreign policy and economic ties toward Beijing. The Liberal Party has been a leading political vehicle of the Filipino elite, capitalists and plantation owners, since the end of World War II.

Removing Duterte and installing Robredo would serve the interests of a rival faction of Filipino capitalists and of Washington, but it would do nothing to alleviate the social inequality and poverty of the masses of Filipino workers and peasants.

The only way forward for the student strikes is to turn to the working class and to take up the political program of socialism, which requires independence from every section of the capitalist class and their political representatives.



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