

The Philippines: Political descendants of Popoy Lagman recycle Stalinist lies

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The Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has exercised ideological sway over mass struggles of workers and peasants in the Philippines for a half-century. At every significant political juncture, it has misled and betrayed the working class, subordinating its struggles to the interests of the party's capitalist allies in the name of "national democracy."

In this way the party aided the imposition of martial law by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, stabilized the rule of Corazon Aquino in 1986, facilitated the constitutional coup of 2001 that installed Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as president, and provided enthusiastic support for the rise to power of the fascistic Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. In each instance they prevented the emergence of an independent movement of the working class behind the banner of socialism and tied mass unrest to the interests of a section of the ruling elite.

A number of organizations broke away from the party over the course of this history and presented themselves to the working class as revolutionary alternatives to the CPP. None of these groups, however, broke with Stalinism. Each represented a tactical variation on the CPP's core program of nationalism and class collaboration.

Among the most prominent of the breakaway organizations were those headed by Filemon 'Popoy' Lagman. In November 2020, the WSWs published an article examining Lagman's history and perspective, demonstrating that he was in fact a Stalinist rival of the CPP.

The findings of that article can be summarized briefly. Lagman and Jose Ma. Sison, founder and ideological leader of the CPP, despite their tactical differences, shared an underlying programmatic continuity rooted in the nationalist conceptions of Stalinism. Lagman, like Sison, put forward the anti-Marxist perspective of building socialism in a single country. This perspective was the fundamental root of the class collaboration and nationalism of Stalinist parties the world over.

Lagman and Sison were in full agreement that the tasks of the revolution in countries of belated capitalist development such as the Philippines were not yet socialist, but national and democratic in character. They both held to the Stalinist perspective of a two-stage revolution. They insisted to the working class, as it entered into open political struggle, that capitalism could not yet be overthrown and the working class could not take power. On the basis of this perspective both the CPP and the organizations of Lagman subordinated workers' struggles to the interests of a section of the capitalist class.

Lagman represented a tactical opposition to the CPP's orientation to armed struggle in the countryside, focusing instead on trade union work in the cities. To secure the support of workers for his nationalist agenda, he spoke more frequently of socialism than Sison, but like Sison deferred its realization to a supposed second stage in the distant future.

Lagman was assassinated in 2001 and the organizations that he founded fractured into various rival groups, all of which retained his Stalinist political perspective. One of these groups, Partido ng Manggagawa (PM, Workers' Party), published a response to the WSWs in February.

The response of the PM has two basic parts.

First, the PM claimed that Lagman fought for a two-stage revolution because it was the only possible form a revolution could take in countries of belated capitalist development. The PM declared, however, that unlike Sison, Lagman never advocated for "an alliance with the national bourgeoisie."

Second, the PM buttressed the political line of Lagman by presenting an anti-Trotskyist straw-man. They falsely claimed that Trotsky maintained that the revolution should skip the democratic stage entirely and that workers in every country needed to "await the eruption of world revolution" before carrying out a revolution in their own country.

Dividing the revolution into democratic and socialist stages inescapably leads to support for the capitalist class. Intentions and declarations to the contrary cannot alter this objective historical logic. Lagman's proclamations about the independence of the working class, and his statements of hostility to capitalism, served only to disguise the class collaborationism of his politics.

In every revolutionary situation the function of a party holding to the two-stage conception is to restrain the working class and to assist the capitalist class, its bourgeois allies in particular, in retaining its hold on power. Both the career of Popoy Lagman and the history of the Partido ng Manggagawa bear this out.

Joseph Estrada, president of the Philippines from 1998 to 2001, cemented his hold on power through a form of working-class populism, built on a persona that he had constructed years earlier as a movie star. During a period of intense labor unrest, in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis, Estrada attempted to stabilize Philippine capitalism by appeals for labor-capital harmony.

Lagman was invited to the presidential palace along with other labor leaders where he publicly declared that he "agreed completely with [Estrada's] desire to bring peace and harmony to labor-capital relations." He added that the best way to do that was to arrest Lucio Tan, a leading capitalist responsible for labor violations against a union allied with Lagman. This was not the independence of the working class. This was a groveling appeal in the name of "labor-capital harmony."

When a majority of the Philippine bourgeoisie turned against Estrada, both the CPP and the organizations led by Lagman followed suit. They channeled mass opposition behind the interests of sections of the capitalist class looking to oust Estrada and install his vice president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Lagman staged a joint rally of his union organizations with the Makati Business Club, the leading representative of the Philippine stock exchange. Rigoberto Tiglao, a former leading member of the CPP, was made spokesperson for the Arroyo administration and he issued a statement hailing Lagman's role in the ouster of Estrada.

After Lagman's assassination in 2001, all of the organizations that originated out of his split with the CPP attempted to claim the mantle of his legacy and all of them formed alliances with the capitalist class and its political representatives.

The Partido ng Manggagawa has a particularly egregious record of continuing the class collaborationism of Lagman. Renato Magtubo has served as spokesperson, elected representative and chair of the PM. His speeches are marked by spinelessness and grovelling. In 1999, he delivered a privilege speech in the legislature as representative of the PM, the “Workers’ Party,” in which he declared:

“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. [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.”

This speech should be inscribed on the tombstone of the Partido ng Manggagawa. A revolutionary party nurtures in the working class a sense of its own strength, teaches workers to walk upright and to become masters of their fate. Magtubo and the PM, in contrast, prostrate themselves before capitalism, begging for scraps from the table.

In 2006 the PM formed close ties with coup-plotting sections of the military, publicly declaring their solidarity with Lt. Sgt. Antonio Trillanes and Brig. Gen. Danilo Lim. These were right-wing military figures who staged an armed seizure of the Manila Peninsula hotel and managed to negotiate political careers out of their machinations. Trillanes is now a Senator. Lim ran for Senate in 2010 with the support of the PM, while standing as a guest candidate of the Liberal Party. Magtubo declared that the coup-plotting general was “an icon of incorruptible and principled fighters among our workingmen in uniform.” Lim was defeated in his senatorial bid, but joined the Duterte administration in 2017 as chair of the influential Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA).

By 2019, relations between PM and the Liberal Party, the official party of the bourgeois opposition to Duterte, were so close that Magtubo ran for Marikina City Council on the Liberal Party slate. He was elected to a seat in the city’s second district as a member of the Liberal Party.

The anti-Trotskyist falsehoods that comprise a majority of the PM article are invoked to cover up this history of betrayals. The PM, like the CPP, insists on the programmatic necessity of constraining the struggles of the working class within the confines of “national democracy.” To do so it must dismiss the programmatic alternative, Trotsky’s perspective of permanent revolution.

The PM has nothing new to say here, however. They employ the stock arguments of Stalinism. While the PM decries the claim that Lagman was a Stalinist, their own argument demonstrates that programmatically this is their political lineage.

The lies recycled by the PM were first put forward in the late 1920s. In the 1930s, when these lies proved inadequate to the task of shoring up the Stalinist bureaucracy, they were supplemented with show trials, mass purges, and assassinations. The PM and Sison both rely on an ignorance of history among their audience when they recycle these threadbare and bloody falsehoods.

The program of Permanent Revolution does not advocate the skipping of democratic tasks, jumping ahead to socialism. The democratic tasks confronting workers in countries of belated capitalist development require above all else a revolutionary solution to the agrarian problem through the breaking up of the large landed estates. It is through the achievement of land reform, which is a democratic and not a socialist measure, that the working class wins the support of the majority of the peasantry in its struggle for power.

It is impossible, however, to maintain a chronological distinction between the democratic and socialist tasks of the revolution, treating them

as stages to be carried out in sequence. The stagist conception, which originated with Plekhanov and the Mensheviks and was adopted by the Stalinists in service to their nationalist interests, is based on an abstract schematism that disregards the historical dynamics of the class struggle.

The stagist conception imposes an artificial limitation on the political struggles of the working class, telling workers “thus far and no farther.” Its effect is to truncate revolutionary struggles and to leave power in the hands of the bourgeoisie. The capitalist class in countries of belated capitalist development no longer has the capacity or interest to carry out the democratic tasks of the revolution. This has been the case over a century.

The so-called “national bourgeoisie” is intimately tied to the landed elite by longstanding economic and familial bonds. It is the class enemy of workers and peasants. Confronting a revolutionary movement of workers, the capitalist class invariably turns on it and suppresses it, resorting to dictatorship and murder should this prove necessary.

The twentieth century was the graveyard of revolution after revolution that were defeated and, in some cases, bloodily suppressed because power was left in the hands of the capitalists. Stalinism played the decisive role in each of these catastrophes.

The achievement of the democratic tasks of the revolution requires that workers take political power into their own hands. In doing so they will be compelled to make inroads against capitalist ownership. It is impossible for a workers’ government to preside over capitalist property relations. Every social struggle, every strike, will require the workers’ government to side with either capitalists or workers. Neutrality is impossible. To retain power, the workers’ government must begin taking socialist measures.

Far from advocating the skipping of the democratic tasks of the revolution, Trotsky established the only effective means of carrying them out: through the permanent revolution. To carry out the democratic tasks, socialist measures were necessary. The revolution could not be divided into stages.

The PM, repeating the line of Lagman, echoed another historical lie of Stalinism: Trotsky advocated abstentionism until it was possible to stage a simultaneous world revolution.

The durability of this lie rests entirely on political and historical ignorance. Anyone who reads the writings of Leon Trotsky knows that he dedicated every moment of his life to politically preparing revolutionary struggles around the globe. At no point did he instruct any group to wait for a coordinated global uprising. The claim is absurd.

As head of the Petrograd Soviet and of the Military Revolutionary Committee, Trotsky led the October Revolution. He and Lenin shared common political conception: that the fate of the Russian revolution, the socialist seizure of power by the working class, rested on the spread of the revolution throughout the advanced capitalist countries.

It was impossible to build socialism in a single country. Socialism will be an immense progressive step beyond the achievements of capitalism, including the integrated world system of production and exchange. To move backwards from this achievement into a form of national autarky and to proclaim this “socialism” was a betrayal of Marxism.

The socialist revolution of October 1917 created the Soviet Union as a transitional workers’ state, not a socialist society. There were two possible historical fates for the October revolution: either the international spread of revolution to the achievement of socialism on a world stage, or the national isolation of the Soviet Union and the eventual restoration of capitalism. The betrayals of Stalinism are entirely responsible for the latter outcome.

Trotsky wrote on this point in his work *Permanent Revolution*, “The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena. Thus, the socialist revolution becomes a permanent revolution in a newer and

broader sense of the word; it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our entire planet.”

Like the CPP, the followers of Lagman peddle class collaborationism and nationalism to the working class. They cover over their betrayals with rhetorical references to Lenin and with lies piled upon lies.

The only way forward for the Filipino working class in its life-and-death struggle against capitalist exploitation and the threat of dictatorship is the program of permanent revolution. The CPP and all of its offshoots, including every organization that bears the heritage of Popoy Lagman, are Stalinist to their core. They share a common hatred of Leon Trotsky and the political independence of the working class, for which he and the Fourth International that he founded in 1938, fought.

Workers looking for a revolutionary alternative to the repeated betrayals that they have suffered at the hands of the Stalinists should study the program of Trotskyism, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and take up the fight to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in the Philippines, the party of world socialist revolution.

We urge workers and youth who want to discuss these issues to contact us.



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