

Communist Party of the Philippines opposes mandatory vaccination, demands school re-openings

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12 January 2022

COVID-19 cases continue to rise in the Philippines as Omicron has now become the dominant variant. Officially 32,246 new cases were recorded on January 12.

The administration of President Rodrigo Duterte has responded with a series of half-measures. A number of regions have been placed under Alert Level 3, which reduce public gatherings and indoor activity without imposing lockdowns. The overwhelming majority of schools remain closed to in-person education.

A vaccine mandate has been put in place, requiring proof of full vaccination be displayed before entering business establishments, public buildings, or riding public transit. Those partially or entirely unvaccinated have been instructed to remain home.

The vaccine mandate is hobbled by the fact that vaccines have not been available until very recently for the majority of the population. Some of those who will be compelled to remain home have not had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated. The measure is further undermined by the exceptions created by the Duterte administration, allowing the unvaccinated to go out for “essential activities,” a list that includes reporting to work.

The Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has attacked the half-measures of the Duterte administration from the right. They do not demand more effective mandatory vaccination, the closure of employment as the essential activity loophole, closure of all non-essential businesses, and cash aid to the working population.

Rather, the CPP denounces mandatory vaccination as “fascist,” demands the full reopening of schools and an end to all lockdowns. They articulate the interests of sections of the capitalist class who see any limitation to business activity as an intolerable barrier to the production of profit and who call for letting the disease rip through the community.

On January 8, Marco Valbuena, chief information officer of the CPP, issued a statement denouncing the vaccine mandate as “patently discriminatory, unlawful, fascist, burdensome, and above all, useless and stupid.” The CPP did not simply argue that the mandate could not be enforced until vaccines were fully available, but went further and adopted the argument of

far-right and libertarian forces that vaccination was “a choice of every individual,” and should not be imposed. The CPP issued a second statement that declared “Requiring or mandating people to get vaccinated is discriminatory, oppressive and burdensome.”

No individual has the right to infect others, any more than they have the right to smoke in a crowded public building. This is not a question of personal liberties or choices, but of public health. Vaccination can and should be mandated, as one element of a strategy to eliminate the virus.

The concern of the CPP, however, is not public health or the mass infection of workers, but the continued profits of corporations. Valbuena wrote “Prohibiting more than half the population from becoming economically productive will only further collapse the economy marked by business closures and bankruptcies, widespread unemployment, loss of income, dislocations, supply disruptions and cause the further deterioration of the people’s overall socioeconomic conditions.”

The CPP speaks with the same voice as the Makati Business Club—a leading corporate association. Workers need to be “economically productive,” damn the cost in human lives, or there will be disruptions to supply chains and business closures.

Valbuena argued that many Filipinos had concerns over the safety and efficacy of vaccines. There is truth to this, but Valbuena deliberately ignores the fact that the party and the various national democratic organizations that follow its political line have been instrumental in cultivating anti-scientific opposition to vaccines.

A leading culprit has been Romeo Quijano, former chair of Health Alliance for Democracy (HEAD), a member organization of the national democratic umbrella group BAYAN. Quijano falsely claimed that vaccines are more dangerous than COVID-19, and called on the mass movement to oppose mandatory vaccinations as an attack on “the individual’s right to free and informed consent.” It is this line that is being repeated by Valbuena and the CPP.

Bulatlat, a news publication associated with the national democratic movement, has run multiple utterly unscientific,

anti-vaccine articles, peddling the notion that COVID-19 was produced in a biological weapons lab working in cahoots with “Big Pharma,” with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to promote “vaccine mania.”

Bulatlat published an article by Quijano in 2019, “Vaccination: Most deceptive tool of imperialism,” in which he argued that “the ‘eradication’ of smallpox and the seemingly dramatic decline in polio cannot be largely attributed to the vaccines” but were rather a result of the “strengthening of natural immunity.” The vaccines were “an imperialist Trojan horse,” a money-making plot of imperialist Big Pharma.

Quijano explicitly rejects the germ theory of disease and calls for “wholistic balance between humans and microbes.” This is quack-speak for living with the pandemic.

While the CPP and national democratic organizations, such as BAYAN, criticize Duterte for the inefficient roll-out of vaccines for COVID-19, they are in fact opposed to mass vaccination and a vaccine mandate.

The CPP articulates the economic interests of the capitalist class, who are hostile to any public health measure that will limit their business activity and the production of profit. Vaccine mandates, lockdowns, school closures—all necessary measures to save human lives and put an end to the spread of the pandemic—are opposed by the elite and their allies in the CPP.

The positions adopted by the CPP are often indistinguishable from those of the far-right. Founder and ideological leader of the CPP, Jose Ma. Sison has on multiple occasions shared material on Facebook originating with the far-right, decrying vaccines as part of a campaign of “global genocide” staged by the “Vatican’s UN.”

Sison promoted material from Afshine Emrani, a Los Angeles based physician and right-wing Zionist, who has been trumpeting the lie that Omicron was “nothing more than a seasonal cold virus” and would produce global immunity to COVID. Sison wrote on January 6, that “people can welcome Omicron as the effective vaccine developed by mass herd immunity.”

Whatever vaccine hesitancy exists in the Philippines, the CPP has been instrumental in cultivating it.

Not only does the party oppose mandatory vaccination, it is the spearhead of the drive to re-open schools. The party-list organizations of the Makabayan Coalition, the electoral group of BAYAN, particularly the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), have been demanding a return to in-person education since the middle of 2020. They promoted the slogan, #LigtasNaBalikPaaralan (Safe Return to Schools), peddling the idea that there was a “safe” way to put children and teachers back in classrooms in the midst of a global pandemic.

In May 2020, representatives of Bayan Muna, ACT, Gabriela, and Kabataan—the party-list organizations of the Makabayan Coalition—introduced legislation mandating the reopening of schools with the provision of mass testing and contact tracing.

This was a recipe for a massive spike in cases. The bill has fortunately not been acted upon and has been pending in committee for the past year and a half.

The blended online and module education promoted by the Duterte administration as a replacement for in-person instruction has placed an immense burden on teachers and has meant a significant loss of education for students, particularly those from poor communities. However, rather than demand government funding to improve distance education, the organizations of BAYAN are pushing students and teachers back into the classroom.

The bill was in keeping with the policy of the CPP, which published a statement in *Ang Bayan* in the same month calling for schools to re-open: “Researches [sic] indicate that school children are less vulnerable to Covid-19 infection. There is no strong evidence to prove that school closures can stop the spread of the infection.” This is a lie.

Every country that has returned to in-person education has seen infection rates skyrocket with schools becoming a leading vector for the mass spread of the virus. The demand to return to in-person education is not about education at all, but about getting workers back on the job and using teachers to provide childcare to make this possible.

The CPP has similarly opposed all lockdown measures implemented by the government. In April 2020, as the pandemic spread like wildfire, the Christians for National Liberation, an integral part of the CPP, issued a statement denouncing Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) as a “fascist instrument of Duterte’s Martial Law.” The CPP did not demand aid to the working class and poor communities, but the lifting of lockdown.

The bottom line for the CPP is the economic interests of the capitalist class. Lockdown in 2020 produced the country’s first recession in 29 years. The gross domestic product contracted by the highest rate in history. National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Planning Secretary Karl Chua, reported that every week of lockdown would see lost production output of PHP150 billion (\$US3 billion).

It was concern over these statistics that CPP spokesperson Valbuena was articulating when he denounced vaccine mandates and called for the population to be “economically productive.” Like their capitalist allies, it is the loss of profit that concerns the CPP and not the loss of human lives.



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