

# **The Left in Parliament: From Boycott to Intervention**

**By Renato “Ka Rene” Magtubo\*  
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*To the organizers of the Conference and this workshop, fellow speakers, comrades and friends:*

My presentation which I basically draw from my keynote address to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regular Congress of our Labor Party – the Partido ng Manggagawa or PM --- aims to illustrate what I view as the strength and weaknesses of the Philippine labor movement for the past few years, from which our party could draw up immediate lessons and future challenges.

It is my ardent belief that my presentation would help attain the objectives of this workshop.

But before I present my view, let me first present the basic issues regarding the formation of our Party in order to place into proper context not only our activities in the past few years but also our tasks for the next period.

## **Rationale of PM as Political party of the working class**

We established the Partido ng Manggagawa in February 2001 not just because we saw the party-list system as an opportunity for marginalized sectors in Philippine society to have representatives in parliament. More so, we recognized the importance of the parliamentary struggle in the overall struggle of the Filipino working class.

Our objectives in engaging in the parliamentary arena are as follows:

1. To advance the struggle for reforms “from within” and “from without” the bourgeois parliament;
2. To utilize the parliament as a vehicle for mass organizing and mass struggle;
3. For cadres and working-class leaders to infiltrate the bourgeois parliament and local government units.

We would utilize the halls of Congress as an instrument for comprehensive propaganda against the rotten social system and capitalist state, thereby, exposing reformism and the futility of achieving social change through mere reforms.

We also saw the opportunity of using local government positions in the expansion and consolidation of our mass base in areas where there is a considerable concentration of the working class.

It is on these objectives that we established the PM as an electoral party of the working class, which would become our principal machinery in advancing the parliamentary struggle of Filipino workers. In pursuit of these aims, the requisites are Party machinery, mass base, leadership, funds and platform.

Now let us review past events – or more precisely situation of the labor movement in our country in the preceding period. We could assess this by examining two particular struggles – the anti-GMA campaign and the campaign for a legislated wage increase.

In the former, we could see how the working class movement fared in fighting for the interest of the people; in the latter, how Philippine labor fought for its own interest.

### **The anti-GMA campaign**

The struggle against the GMA regime was heightened in the past few years. The people’s protests demanded the ouster of GMA and the establishment of a new government. This was brought by the deepening rifts among the forces that were for and against GMA since the Second People Power in 2001, the exposè of corruption that implicated members of the First Family, and the disclosure of massive electoral fraud in the 2004 presidential elections – in particular, the “Hello Garci” scandal.

The GMA administration faced a “legitimacy crisis”. The fissures manifested even in various institutions of the State – the legislature, the police, the military, in traditional political parties, in the Church. Cabinet members resigned. Two impeachment cases were filed in Congress. Rallies and demonstrations erupted. Groups and elements of the military and police severed themselves from the “chain of command”.

On the other hand, we were witness to how the GMA government – driven by desperation to preserve power – distorted and violated the law to justify the suppression of protests against the regime, how it courted the loyalty and support of the AFP/PNP top brass, big business, the House majority, and local government officials.

The regime apparently withstood the threat of a possible downfall. It has even attempted to extend its rule beyond 2010 by amending the Constitution. However, the crisis is not yet over. The government is still hounded by various economic and political issues.

Now the infighting of the elite – the political parties that are pro-GMA and anti-GMA – would be channeled in the May 2007 senatorial, congressional and local elections. The coming elections would be a “proxy war” between the ousted Estrada and the incumbent Arroyo.

In a rough sketch, we looked back at the anti-GMA campaign to re-examine and contemplate on the role of the labor movement in the said struggle. Comrades, these are my observations:

1. The progressive and militant labor unions actively participated in the anti-GMA campaign although they joined different groups. Some traditional labor federations and most independent (non-affiliated) unions adopted a neutral – or an apolitical - stance to the brewing political conflict. The leadership of TUCP and FFW backed the beleaguered government. The majority of non-unionized workers did not join the protests.
2. The “proletarian imprint” of progressive unions in the anti-GMA struggle was conspicuously absent. They were mere participants or parts of various multi-sectoral formations. This was probably caused by the lack of independent, sustained and escalated activities on the political crisis that rocked the Arroyo government;

3. The different multi-sectoral formations against GMA were not united. There were different slogans. While there were attempts to unite these groups in the campaign against GMA's Charter Change (Cha-cha), they were not decisive in the eventual suspension of the convening of an elite-dominated Constituent Assembly. The opposition of the Church was more crucial in the "tactical retreat" of GMA and house speaker de Venecia;
4. In the anti-GMA struggle, there was no spontaneous action from the ranks of workers in firms and factories, and the urban poor in communities. They say it can be attributed to the "lack of alternative" on the questions of leadership and type of government that could attract or inspire the masses to join the struggle. But this reveals the lack or absence of organizing work among non-organized masses. Our propaganda and agitation have not penetrated their ranks;
5. There were no solid and sustained activities at the territorial level – even in Metro Manila – that could propel and sustain the anti-GMA campaign.

### **The Campaign for a Legislated Wage Increase**

We raised the campaign for a legislated wage increase as a "tactical fight" among other issues that we are pursuing. Meaning, this is not just a propaganda battle. Our aim for a definite tactical period is the *actual* legislation of a nationwide across-the-board wage hike.

However, since the start of the campaign until now – when the proposal has reached the Senate and there is a possibility of enactment – our campaign is still teeming with the following weaknesses and shortcomings:

1. Workers' participation in the campaign is weak. Although a National Wage Alliance has been formed, the federations and labor unions in the alliance are not active in the campaign. Most of them regard the campaign not as a serious fight to legislate a wage hike but a mere opportunity to lambast the capitalists and the state;
2. Though the TUCP and FFW – the two largest labor centers controlled by moderate labor leaders – have not directly contradicted our campaign, they still do not support our proposed bill;
3. The wage campaign fails to entice the participation of many independent unions and federations. We have not set-up a mechanism to mobilize non-unionized workers;
4. The wage campaign has not reached a national character. Our protests and activities primarily remain in Metro Manila.

On the other hand, the capitalist class has launched an "all-out war" against the proposed legislated wage increase. The capitalist line of blackmail and black propaganda – the threat of the economic collapse, inflation and retrenchment if wages are increased – is now read in all newspapers and can be heard in radio. The labor department, trade department, and economic planning agency are joining the chorus. The objective of the capitalist propaganda offensive is to mislead the public into supporting a Senate rejection or a Palace veto of the proposed legislated wage hike.

The bitter truth in our campaign is that workers lack the unity among workers to fight for their own immediate interest of increasing wages while the employers have now united as a class to defend their class interest and their profit margins.

But if we could convince the organized section of the working class – through their unions, federations and centers to take up the fight for a wage hike – an escalation of the class struggle could be guaranteed. And once the wage struggle escalates, it would aggravate the political situation by placing the working class at the forefront of the people’s struggle.

## **Lessons and Challenges of the Campaigns Against GMA and for a Legislated Wage Increase**

Even with a very limited capacity, the Party strived to become the vehicle for labor unity and struggle in the campaign against GMA and for a legislated wage increase – from within and outside the halls of parliament.

In the anti-GMA campaign, we utilized the halls of Congress to expose the bankruptcy of merely ousting GMA through the two impeachment cases. We called for the establishment of a Transitional Revolutionary Government. The Party likewise bared Congress as a “pigsty” when the administration railroaded the convening of a pro-GMA Constituent Assembly.

The PM played a crucial role in the formation of Labor Advocates for Better Order and Reform (LABOR), which is composed of 15 federations and 2 labor centers and whose basis of unity is against GMA’s Cha-cha, the fascist Presidential Proclamation 1017, and the continued detention of labor leader Crispin Beltran. LABOR also stood for a legislated wage increase.

Along with LABOR, we were instrumental in the establishment of MANGGAGAWA KONTRA CHAHA (*literal translation: Workers against Cha-cha*). This is a tactical formation of unions, federations and centers that was formed in alliance with Solidarity of Unions and Labor Organizations for New Government (SULONG).

In the campaign for a legislated wage increase, we initiated the tactical campaign “Bantay Kongreso, Bantay Sweldo” – a camp-out and picket outside Congress – that gained the endorsement of 125 parliament representatives to the proposed bill for a wage hike. Along with other labor groups, we formed the National Wage Alliance, an alliance of unions, federations and centers under LABOR and SULONG, which aims to pass a legislated wage hike in the Senate.

Based on our initiatives in both campaigns, we can draw out the following lessons:

1. The scope of organized labor is very limited; it is also fragmented. From a 17.523 million wage and salaried workers, there are only 246,000 workers covered by collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). This layer of Filipino labor is under hundreds of independent unions, conservative federations, progressive labor groups, which is likewise divided by different ideological and political reasons.

Hence, even in the most elementary demand for a wage increase, which could and should force labor groups to transcend their differences, a unified struggle by unionized workers in the private sector could not be easily attained.

2. In the said campaigns, the struggles and activities are commonly centralized in one place or in one state institution within Metro Manila. Our activities have failed to tap areas outside Manila. There is very little or no nationwide participation by workers in our campaigns.

3. The scope of the propaganda and agitation is very limited because our focus is only on those organized in unions and community-associations.

We have to adjust to the growing informalization of labor. Presently, there are 25.5 million informal workers (estimated by NAPC Informal Sector Rep. JC Parilla). These workers do not have a regular and steady income. They are either unemployed or insufficiently employed. They find it hard to form a union or an association. Most of them could be found in poor communities.

Majority among workers who are regularly employed do not belong to a union. They could be found in the country's export processing zones (EPZA). In 2005, they are estimated to be at 1.128 million, from 4 public economic zones (Bataan, Baguio, Mactan, Cavite) and in 36 private economic zones.

There is an increase in the numbers of workers in the service sector, particularly those in Business Process Outsourcing such as call centers, software development, etc, who earn much more than the ordinary wage-earner. They number at around 245,000. In 2010, this figure is estimated to increase at 920,764 workers (DTI Sec. Peter Favila, PDI, Jan. 20, 2007).

4. Workers in the public sector are inactive in their issues as government employees and as part of the Filipino people such as Cha-cha and corruption in the bureaucracy; at,

5. Our Party chapters could not mobilize and influence workers from unions and associations in their respective areas and communities. The main force of our campaigns still comes from unions and associations of our founding organizations – BMP, SUPER, KPML and ZOTO.

### **Urgent Tasks for the Next Three Years**

To sum up, the labor movement in the country remains weak based on its level of organization and struggle. Until the workers' movement is fragmented, unorganized, and unable to muster the scope and capacity to paralyzing actions, it could not struggle effectively for its own interest. More so, until such conditions are met, it could not influence nor lead the struggle of other classes and sectors of society.

Hence, the imperative is to seek out and patiently resolve the problems which beset the labor movement in terms of unity, organization, and level of struggle. Here lies the basis of our Party tasks for the coming three years.

I would now share with you some of our party's urgent task that would illustrate our intervention in the parliament and in the labor movement:

1. Inside and outside the halls of Congress, the party should lead a campaign to reform laws that restrict the rights to self-organization, collective bargaining and to strike. Such campaign should also focus on abolishing existing laws on wage fixing whose basis and mechanisms promote starvation wages through the regional wage boards. The enabling law to the Constitutional guarantee for a living wage must be enacted. This law will abolish the wage boards, set up a National Wage Commission and set the cost of living as the sole determinant of minimum wages. In the conduct of this campaign, special attention must be given to conducting propaganda at agitation for workers at Export Processing Zones and "Call centers";

2. Set-up a campaign, "from within" and "from without" the halls of parliament regarding poverty, corruption and the lack of basic social services. This would entail a campaign for the increase in the

yearly government budget for education, healthcare and housing. This would also cover a campaign against government subservience to borrowing and debt payments, the lowering of electricity and water rates, and the curtailment of corruption in all levels of government. It is on this campaign that we would organize and mobilize the “informal labor” section of the working class;

3. For public sector employees, we would initiate a campaign for the overhaul of laws and rules regarding the unionization of civil servants and their particular issue regarding salary standardization and rationalization (streamlining) of the bureaucracy. Special stress should be laid on organizing the struggle of public school teachers and employees of local government units;

4. A campaign for the massive Party recruitment in areas where there is a large concentration of workers. Its expected output is not just the increase in Party members but also an assessment of our organizing work; lessons have to be learned from our reviewing our efforts in organizing and expansion. We would also emphasize the individual recruitment of presidents of unions, federations, labor centers and other workers’ associations;

5. The Party’s relation with electoral labor parties from other countries must be initiated and strengthened. We should learn from the lessons and experience of advancing the parliamentary struggle and establish party-to-party relations based on solidarity and advancing the international working class struggle;

I think I have said much. Thank you very much for inviting us to the Conference and to share with you our views and experiences in this workshop. Mabuhay!

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