

#Manggagawa naman: Trade Union Behavior and the 2022 Philippine Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine labor movement has been fragmented since the emergence of organized labor in the country during the 1920s. This phenomenon continued during the Third Republic amidst Cold War and even after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship with the Philippine Left's great split in the 1990s. While in recent years, there were points of unity between different labor groups in some labor issues that even culminated in the formation of a labor electoral coalition in 2019, the hope for labor unity was once again shattered in the 2022 Philippine presidential election. The four largest labor formations have separately endorsed three presidential candidates which signified the absence of the phenomenon of labor vote. From September 2021 to February 2022, the groups released official statements and press releases concerning the elections, their endorsements, and the motivations behind their electoral actions. In this article, these were examined with the help of available

literature on Philippine labor to relate each group's endogenous dynamics, i.e., trade union origin and ideology, to their respective endorsements of the presidential candidates. The results suggest that in the context of the 2022 elections, the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition and the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) adopted democratic and political unionism, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) maintained economic unionism, and the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) upheld revolutionary unionism, as their trade union behaviors. While they differ in their types of unionism that signify disunity, their separate actions show that the labor movement in its entirety is now more explicit in its political participation in elections.

Keywords: ideology, labor movement, Philippine Left, trade union behavior

Introduction

The Philippine labor movement, historically, is fragmented. This has been the case since the 1920s with the division between radical labor unions, which are communist-inspired and pro-independence, and the reformist ones, which are deemed soft and in favor of the then-American rule of the country (Richardson, 1984, p. 191). In the 1950s, this was the case as well with the politico-ideological cleavage between the left-wing radicals and the Christian-oriented conservative unions where the latter had played a role in the government's suppression of unions suspected of being fronts of the communist movement (Ramos, 1987, p. 179). However, the most significant among these was the split within the Communist Party of the Philippines (Maoist) in the early half of the 1990s when some of the party formations and its affiliated labor organizations bolted out to reject the reaffirmation of the political and ideological lines of the movement (Pabico, 1999).

Thirty years after the split, the rift between the two major camps, namely the RAs (reaffirmists) and the RJs (rejectionists), can still be felt in varying degrees although, in recent years, there were points of unity between the rival labor organizations, especially under the populist government of Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022). In fact, in 2018, a historic Labor Day unity march was conducted together by Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) and Nagkaisa Labor Coalition, the two largest labor formations in the country. This was historic for it was the first time it happened in almost thirty years that rival organizations marched next to each other to call for the ending of endo or contractualization in the country (Cruz, 2018). The following year, the Labor Win Alliance was formed and consisted of progressive, pro-labor candidates that included Neri Colmenares, Leody de Guzman, and Sonny Matula. The labor slate positioned itself as the "third pole to the tyrannical Duterte regime and the yellow elite opposition (Buan, 2019). The labor alliance didn't win any seats, however, it developed a kind of unprecedented unity among different groups which can be considered significant due to their political and ideological differences.

While the 2019 electoral participation of the labor movement was relatively united, the 2022 elections were the opposite as the four largest

labor formations in the country had declared their support for three different presidential candidates. While most labor groups (Federation of Free Workers, Partido ng Manggagawa, and Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa) under the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition and the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), an allied labor center of the Makabayan Coalition, endorsed the presidential and vice presidential candidacies of Vice President Leni Robredo and Senator Kiko Pangilinan, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) gave its support towards the former dictator's son Bongbong Marcos, Jr. and Sara Duterte despite its membership under the Nagkaisa. Meanwhile, the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) backed the candidacies of its chairperson Leody de Guzman and Laban ng Masa chairperson Walden Bello. What were the trade union behaviors manifested by different Philippine labor formations in their respective electoral endorsements? How did trade union origin and ideology affect the change or maintenance of their trade union behaviors? These are the questions that were addressed for us to critically understand the trade union behavior of each labor formation concerning their participation in the 2022 Philippine elections.

Trade union behavior

In understanding the trade union behavior of different labor formations in the Philippines, particularly in the context of the 2022 elections, it is imperative to adopt an appropriate and relevant framework that fits the specific socioeconomic conditions of the country. This helped explain why these groups adopted different electoral actions, i.e., the endorsement of different presidential candidates. Leopoldo Dejillas's *Trade Union Behavior in the Philippines, 1946-1990* (1994) constructs a theoretical model which applies Mark Perlman's trade union behavior categories in the context of a developing economy like the Philippines. While Dejillas's analysis has been there for twenty-eight years, I argue that it is still relevant for the country's economy has not significantly changed in the previous decades. According to Batalla (2018, p. 217), our economy has largely retained its consumption-driven, service-oriented character with the manufacturing sector losing its relevance since the 1980s.

In his work, Dejillas (p. 5) adopted the theoretical framework of Mark Perlman and came up with his new model appropriate to the context of a developing economy like the Philippines. Each of these behaviors of course is based on its corresponding trade union character (the combination and interaction of the trade union's exogenous and endogenous dynamics), which in turn results in the differences of actions of the labor centers. For him, there are five tendencies for trade unions:

1. As part of revolutionary movement guided principally by Marxist theories;
2. As economic institutions exhibiting a largely business or welfare outlook;
3. As moral or ethical institutions, an ideal pursued by Christian social reformers;
4. As democratic and political organizations involved in society's democratic process and power struggles; and
5. As a psychological or defensive reaction to early conditions of industrialism

First, revolutionary unionism's primary character is being structuralist. This relates to the capitalist system where capitalists accumulate and maximize profit at the expense of the working class whose wages are meager to uplift themselves from slave-like conditions. As organizing centers of the working class, Lozovsky (1935) noted Karl Marx's belief that trade unions are very important as organized means in the abolishment of the system of wage labor (p. 17). Moreover, "the trade unions must serve as a powerful lever in the hands of the working class for the struggle against the system of exploitation" (p. 20). Marxist-oriented unions are often "confrontational, adversarial, hostile, radical, and combative" in their political actions, may it be in general strikes, extra-parliamentary uprisings, or even in an armed struggle against the state (Dejillas, 1994, p. 7).

Second, economist trade unions are considered conservative for their reductionist focus on economic issues such as higher wages, better benefits and working conditions, and job security, among others. This is the reason why these unions are also called "business" or "social welfare" institutions (Dejillas, 1994, p. 8). With this orientation, "trade unions posed no serious

threat to the stability of the society within which they operated.” Mechanisms, like collective bargaining, may result in collaboration between the unions and employers which in turn transforms their relationship into a merely economic one. This helps mystify class conflict and prevents radicalism among union members (Hyman, 1975, pp. 98-99).

Third, moralist trade unions are moderate and adhere to ethical or religious principles which separates them from revolutionary and economist unions. Dejillas (1994, p. 11) stated that there has not been any labor theorist who had explained how this kind of unionists behave but he suggested that they guide themselves with Christian values that include social justice, love, peace, truth, and brotherhood of men. Still, however, moralist unions do not have a metanarrative hence making them oscillate between radicalism and economism. Fourth, democratic and political trade unionism devotes itself to influencing economic planning, policy formulation, and decision-making. Two of its possible political actions are winning an electoral competition and directly supporting a political party. Allan Flanders (as cited in Poole, 2020, pp. 17-18) elaborates that democratic and political trade unions support a political party “to further their own objectives and that taking sides is the best strategy because it produces the best results.”

Lastly, there is defensive or manualist trade unionism. Interestingly, this type of unionism does not only protect its members from the evils of capitalism but also the intellectuals’ imposition of revolutionary ideology upon the membership. Without the vanguard leadership, as in the case of Marxist unions, manualist unions are generally pragmatic, pessimistic, and cautious in dealing with labor-related issues. Their primary concern, Selig Perlman (as cited in Poole, 2020, p. 14) contended, is to get the upper hand on the existing economic opportunities without looking at other social issues.

Trade union behavior in the 2022 Philippine presidential election

What separates different trade unions from each other is how they accept and perceive material (social, economic, political, etc.) conditions, as laid out by Dejillas (1994, p. 1). In other words, exogenous (external) dynamics

depend on their endogenous (internal) counterparts like union origin, ideological line, social beliefs, structure, etc. The amalgamation of these factors then produces trade union behavior. To understand the trade union behaviors of different labor formations during the 2022 Philippine presidential election, however, I only considered origin and ideology because they were already enough to satisfy the article's concern with the elections in contrast with Dejillas's work which covered a long period from 1946 to 1990. Nonetheless, in his book, he identified TUCP as largely economist, KMU as highly revolutionary, and FFW as primarily democratic and political. Dejillas perhaps had not yet included BMP for it was merely a year after its formation by former organizers of KMU's Manila-Rizal regional chapter as part of the 1990s split in the Philippine Left (Gershman, 1994).

It can be said that both the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition and the Alliance of Labor Leaders for Leni (ALL4LENI) are mainly led, if not entirely dominated, by the FFW. We can see it through the Nagkaisa chairmanship of FFW president Atty. Sonny Matula who was also the senatorial bet of the other member organizations of the labor coalition such as PM and SENTRO. Yet because of the umbrella organizational structure of Nagkaisa, where TUCP and BMP are also members, I believe that FFW, PM (Partido ng Manggagawa), and SENTRO (Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa) chose to initiate the launching of the ALL4LENI as a courtesy with other groups in Nagkaisa who did not support the candidacy of Leni Robredo. More importantly, FFW, as the leading organization both in Nagkaisa and the ALL4LENI, consistently maintained its democratic and political unionism during these elections. When former vice president Leni Robredo declared and filed her presidential candidacy on October 7, 2021, the labor leaders of the ALL4LENI (2021a) in a press statement zealously welcomed Robredo's declaration:

She walked with us, with the workers, farmers, and those in the *laylayan ng lipunan* (lower strata of society) in the past several ye ars. We will walk with her, *kapitbisig* (with arms link), in this enormous struggle to uphold our democraticideals, defend trade union and human rights and uplift the lives of the Filipino people.

The resolve of the FFW, along with other ALL4LENI member organizations, to support the candidacy of Robredo was anchored in their belief that it was only the vice president that would uplift the conditions of the working class given her track record of supporting the struggle of the marginalized and her acceptance of the labor agenda laid out by the group. According to the ALL4LENI, Robredo previously accepted their labor agenda that included the following: (1) ending contractualization; (2) advancement of national minimum wage; (3) freedom of association and to stop trade union repression and human rights violations; (4) universal healthcare and strengthening of public healthcare system; and (5) employment guarantee. In the absence of a candidate in her slate coming from the marginalized sectors, the group called to include FFW president and Nagkaisa chair Sonny Matula in her senatorial slate which would be heeded by Robredo on October 22, 2021. In their call, the ALL4LENI (2021b) stated,

Sa batayan ng demokrasya ang representasyon ng uring manggagawa ay sapat na dahilan. Kung maari nga lang na higit pa rito ang mapaunlakan. Subalit inuunawarin namin ang kapasyahan ni VP Leni na iangat ang layunin ng pakikipagkaisa sa ibang pwersa para matiyak ang tagumpay sa darating na halalalan. Ganunpaman, kami'y nanininiwala na higit na lalakas ang tsansa ng tagumpay kung higit na lalawak ang representasyon ng batayang sektor sa kanyang koalisyon. (Based on democracy, the representation of the working class is enough reason. If ever, more than this should be accepted. However, we understand the decision of VP Leni to uplift the goal of unifying with other forces to ensure the victory in the coming elections. Nevertheless, we believe that the chances of victory will strengthen if the basic sector's representation will further expand in her coalition).

Considering FFW's intertwined origin and ideology, we may understand why they chose to support Robredo. During the height of the anti-communist campaign in the country in the early 1950s, the Jesuits were instrumental in the banning of the Congress of Labor Organizations (CLO), on the charges of being a front of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) and the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB). They also led the founding

of the FFW on June 19, 1950, headed then by Johnny Tan (Scalice, 2017, p. 95). As an anti-communist labor center, it asserted freedom “from communism, cheaters, capitalist control, politics and politicians, and from government control” (BLR-DOLE, 2005). FFW instead embraced Christian democracy which, in the context of labor relations, obviously prefers a traditional, peaceful, and reformist course of labor actions. Hence, the Christian democratic origin and ideology have made FFW (1) believe in the electoral struggle as a peaceful path towards social change and (2) support Robredo’s Liberal Party to realize its pro-labor objectives. These two explain why FFW’s trade union behavior as democratic and political unionism.

Compared to other labor groups that endorsed the candidacy of Robredo, the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) came relatively later. This can be attributed largely to its membership in the Makabayan Coalition which was only able to declare its support for Robredo’s candidacy in January 2022 after months of kiss and makeup relationship with the liberals (Cepeda, 2022). In its declaration, one of the common points raised with the Robredo camp is the pro-labor agenda of enacting the Security of Tenure Bill, job creation through public employment program, and an increase in the minimum wage (Koalisyon Makabayan, 2022). On the part of the KMU, the labor center committed its organization to unite with Robredo for the advancement of a pro-people agenda:

Sa aming mga manggagawa, napakahalaga ng pagsulong para sa mas mataas at nakabubuhay na sahod, at pagtindig laban sa endo at kontraktwalisasyon. Buo at mahigpit ang kaisahan sa ilalim ng bandila ng Kilusang Mayo Uno para makipag-tulungan at maiabante pa ang mga kahingian at karapatan ng mga manggagawa. Bukas na bukas po ang aming organisasyon, kasama ng mga manggagawa, na makipag-usap at makipagtulungan kay VP Leni Robredo at Senator Kiko Pangilinan tungo sa pagkamit ng mga panawagan ng manggagawa at mamamayan (Kilusang Mayo Uno, 2022). (To us, workers, to advance for an increased, living wage, and to stand against endo and contractualization are very important. The unity is solid in its entirety, under the banner of the Kilusang Mayo Uno, to help and advance

further the campaigns and rights of the workers. Our organization is very open, along with workers, to talk and cooperate with VP Leni Robredo and Senator Kiko Pangilinan towards the achievement of campaigns of the workers and the people.)

Interestingly, from revolutionary unionism, Kilusang Mayo Uno had its trade union behavior shifted towards democratic and political unionism in 2022 with its endorsement of Robredo. While some might say that this was a retreat from its “confrontational and combative” tradition, I believe that this was not necessarily the case. The decision of the KMU to support Robredo only showed that it is a dynamic labor center that tried to adapt to a critical juncture of the country’s sociopolitical situation. From its statements above, the KMU’s priority, aside from advancing socioeconomic reforms, was to commit itself, politically and organizationally, to the broad united front against the threat of the Marcos-Duterte alliance. To defeat this ‘North-South unity’, the KMU, along with the Makabayan Coalition, believed that it would only be possible if it joined the democratic forces that were behind the electoral campaign of Robredo.

Historically, it is not difficult to understand why the KMU committed to a united front against the candidacy of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. First and foremost, the labor center was founded in 1980 during the tumultuous years of martial law regime of his father Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. Its founding was a direct trade union expression against the regime’s “restrictive policies with respect to the workers’ right to strike, compulsory registration of negotiated agreements and the persistent problems of unemployment and underemployment” which in turn led many labor unions toward left-wing, radical politics (Ramos, 1987, p. 175). As the champion of what it calls “genuine, militant, and nationalist unionism”, it became the new progressive, alternative force at the time when the Marcos regime backed traditional labor federations with pro-capital interests. Labor unity, also, is nothing new with KMU as it had initiated a series of united front campaigns with FFW and TUCP in the early half of the 1980s (Torres-Yu, 2011, pp. 92-97).

Yet, Torres-Yu (2011, p. 105) laid out that the KMU's orientation, unlike other labor centers, is beyond economism where it sees the American domination in the country and the maintenance of the semifeudal economy as the main reasons for Philippine underdevelopment which will not be mitigated by short-term neoliberal economic reforms. In other words, genuine independence and national industrialization would only be realized once the country's neocolonial setup ends. If we look at the KMU's type of unionism and history, it is only fair to say that these nationalist principles would be non-negotiable should the militant labor center come into conflict with a Robredo presidency. The KMU's trade union behavior of democratic and political unionism in supporting Robredo hence was only a temporary phase contextualized in the 2022 elections.

On February 23, 2022, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), the largest labor confederation in the country, announced their support for the tandem of Bongbong Marcos, Jr. for president and Sara Duterte-Carpio for vice president. TUCP claimed that it consulted its national membership and followed its will, a move that was in contrast with the endorsement of Robredo by the majority of labor organizations under the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition where TUCP is also one of its lead convenors (Medenilla, 2022). Without giving concrete details, the group said that Marcos Jr. "has a long-standing relationship" with them and that they are confident that his future administration's national development program will cater to workers' needs. On that same day, Marcos Jr. had not even crafted his labor agenda. In its statement, TUCP essentially repeated the electoral mantra of the Marcos-Duterte tandem,

The TUCP believes that national unity, as championed by the Bongbong-Sara tandem is imperative for economic recovery. The national government, business, and labor should work together to forge a comprehensive plan to normalize business, and for workers to get back to their jobs (TUCP, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, TUCP has been consistent in having its behavior of economist unionism, which is conservative and collaborationist in nature, and enabler not only of the Marcos dictatorship but also the return of the family to power by supporting the candidacy of Marcos, Jr. When TUCP declared its support, it earned the ire of other labor groups, including the ALL4LENI and the BMP. The Nagkaisa Labor Coalition, in its statement, was disappointed with TUCP stating that the labor center has “simply went back to its original form—the protection of its parochial interest” (Nagkaisa Labor Coalition, 2022).

More importantly, it should not be forgotten that TUCP was organized by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos himself in 1975 at the time when he repressed and ban labor strikes, especially those launched by militant unions. TUCP did not only avoid strikes but was also indifferent to collective bargaining agreements at the expense of exploited workers. To make things worse, it supported the major political maneuverings of the Marcos regime through elections and constitutional amendments (Torres-Yu, 2011, pp. 87-88). Being the classical example of right-wing, yellow unionism in the Philippines, it was the regime’s accomplice in polarizing organized labor and served as a rubber stamp of anti-labor policies (Ramos, 1987, p. 185). That is why the TUCP’s decision in 2022 should no longer be taken as a surprise given its history of collaboration and compromises with the capitalists and the government’s anti-labor policies. In this regard, Louis Althusser (2020, p. 21) identified trade unions as one of the state apparatuses that reinforces the ideology of subjecting the workers to the illusions of the capitalist system. Here, yellow unions contribute to the creation of false consciousness of blinding their members to mere economism, veering them away from genuine, radical unionism.

Of all the labor formations in the Philippines, it was only the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP), through the socialist party Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM), that fielded its presidential candidate in the person of its chair Leodigario “Ka Leody” de Guzman. The relevance of de Guzman’s candidacy was not only because he was the first labor leader to do so but also because he is openly socialist, running on the platform of democratic socialism, unprecedented in the political history of the Philippine Republic (Cardona, 2022). Why he decided to run was anchored in his group’s

belief that all the other candidates were mere representatives of the “elitist and anti-worker interests” that also characterized the past governments. For the BMP and the PLM, it would no longer suffice to counter the Marcos-Duterte alliance by uniting with the “elitist” opposition which was represented by Robredo. In his statement on September 29, 2021, a day after his party nomination, de Guzman argued,

Upang umahon tayo sa krisis sa kalusugan at kabuhayan, hindi sasapat na tanggalin lang ang palpak na rehimeng Duterte sa puwesto kung ang ipapalit lang din ay bagong mga kinatawan ng mga kapitalista, asendero, at elitista. Ang kailangan natin ay isang gobyerno na tunay na kinakatawan ang interes ng mga karaniwang manggagawa’t mamamayan. Sa 2022 eleksyon, manggagawa naman (Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino, 2021a). (For us to rise out of crisis in health and livelihood, it will not be enough to merely remove the failed Duterte regime from power if the one that will replace are new representatives of the capitalists, landlords, and the elite. What we need is a government that truly represents the interest of the workers and the people. In the coming 2022 elections, it is workers turn.)

Thus it was only the BMP that possessed revolutionary unionism as its trade union behavior during the 2022 elections. This can be explained in two points based on the labor center’s statements: first, the BMP’s supported presidential candidate was its chair Ka Leody de Guzman who, along with other candidates and supporters of the Partido Lakas ng Masa, directly and unprecedentedly participated in the elections and believed that it should be #ManggagawaNaman or it is now the time for the Filipino workers to directly take political power through democratic means. They believe that blocking the Marcos-Duterte alliance would not suffice as long as the successor of Rodrigo Duterte would be the same elite class that has irreconcilable interests vis-a-vis the working class.

Second, the group proposed not mere reforms but radical changes in the country’s political and economic landscapes. While it might be too ambitious, BMP’s de Guzman was applauded by some of the respected

personalities from the Philippine academe. Prof. Tony La Viña recognized the distinction that Ka Leody made in most issues tackled during the February 4 presidential forum where he was the only one who presented radical solutions that the country needs (ANC, 2022). Meanwhile, Prof. Julio Teehankee acknowledged the labor leader's radical solution as the "real alternative narrative" in contrast with the rest of the candidates who were saying the same neoliberal arguments (Laban ng Masa, 2022a). Lastly, there was Dr. Floro Quibuyen who appreciated De Guzman and Walden Bello, PLM's vice-presidential candidate, for delving into the root cause and concrete solution to the country's socioeconomic crisis. Whatever the election's outcome, Quibuyen believed that the two "have planted the seed and pointed the way to real development" (Laban ng Masa, 2022b).

The radicalism behind the pronouncements of Ka Leody and the BMP came as well from their origin and ideology. As previously stated, the BMP was formed in 1993 because of the split within the Philippine Left where it was an offshoot of the KMU's Manila-Rizal region. More than this, compared to the KMU's espousal of national democracy and anti-imperialism, BMP is an openly socialist labor center which explains why De Guzman ran on a democratic socialist program. Surprisingly, this garnered positive responses from the academe which has been generally critical of the electoral politics of the Philippine Left since at least the democratic restoration in 1986. Nonetheless, BMP's revolutionary unionism in the 2022 Philippine presidential election was a significant point in the history of the fragmented labor movement where the centers have so far failed to develop the phenomenon of a labor vote.

Conclusion

The analysis of different presidential endorsements of the four labor formations shows that endogenous dynamics, namely origin and ideology, played a key role in their electoral actions which in turn decided the change and maintenance of trade union behavior in the context of the 2022 Philippine presidential election. The fact that the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition and the Kilusang Mayo Uno adopted democratic and political unionism, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines maintained economic unionism, and the

Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino upheld revolutionary unionism as their trade union behaviors only show that the Philippine labor movement continues to be fractured yet more explicit in its political participation in elections. Having a grasp of different trade union behaviors and their contextualization in Philippine politics is vital for us to understand the roles they play not only in every election but more importantly in the positions they take concerning Filipino workers' rights and the latter's assertion in the parliamentary field. From the categorization of Dejillas, it is obvious historically and empirically why KMU, BMP, and other labor groups under Nagkaisa are politically reliable while TUCP remains the opposite since its creation. The type of unionism, in other words, is significant to know if an organization is genuinely pro-labor or a mere tool for continuous repression and exploitation.

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