

The Transition Role of the Asian Labor Education Center*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the transition role of the Asian Labor Education Center (ALEC) from an institution offering workers' education to an academic degree-granting school in industrial relations. Part I is the development and evolution of the workers' education program of the Center. Part II is the emergence around the second half of the 1960s and into the 1970s, of a plethora of external trade union based, and non-trade union based support for workers' education in the Philippines and in the other developing countries in this region. Part III is the change in the paradigm for development strategy, considered at the global level. These phases although distinct from each other, are not by any means mutually independent of each other. In fact, each has an impact on the others in important and critical ways.

PART I: DEVELOPMENT OF WORKERS' EDUCATION IN THE ALEC

From the mid 1950s (when the Labor Education Center or LEC, the forerunner of ALEC was established) to the 1970s, the ALEC was the primary resource base and focal point in the conduct of workers' education as a vital support program to the just emerging

* This paper was read during the Round Table Discussion on "The Role of UP ALEC in Workers' Education in Asia" held on December 3, 2004 at UP SOLAIR, in commemoration of the School's 50th anniversary.

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workers' organizations, not only in the Philippines, but in the Asia Pacific region. The trade unions in the region were still preoccupied with survival issues then. To some extent, many in the movement still are. The first generation of workers' education activities therefore, reflected the nature of the demands by workers' organizations on the Center. Understandably therefore, the first generation workers' education activities focused on such subjects as: "How to organize a union", "Trade union philosophy", "Trade union structures", "Trade unions and democracy", "Basics of Collective Bargaining", "Grievance procedures", and other grassroots concerns. These "basic" courses, as we called them then, were carried out all over the Philippines where industries were established. The faculty members of the Center were primarily drawn from the labor movement. Initially the Center maintained a network of regional offices in the more industrialized regions of the Philippines. Later, in the interest of rationalizing the deployment of its limited resources, the Center, relative to the increasing clamor of the unions for more training activities, closed down the regional offices. But the regions continued to be serviced from the Diliman campus office. This restructuring of the delivery system of the Center's educational activities was not a retreat. The closing down of the regional office of the Center was but a strategic repositioning of the Center's continuing modest resources. It is also important to note that the basic courses in the Workers' Education program of ALEC were designed to strengthen the building of the foundation of labor - the trade unions.

The ALEC was cognizant of the fundamental principle that workers' education is the primary responsibility of trade unions. I suppose this cognition was shared by the University administration. Although workers' education is a non-academic program in the University, the University continued to provide funding support, albeit modest, to the Center and its workers' education program, in keeping with its mission as a diverse university, providing a variety of educational and training services for the advancement of a democratic civil society.

As the trade unions gained better footing and confidence, the Center started to develop new levels of academic programs within the framework of its workers' education program, to cater to the emerging and expanding challenges to the growing workers' organizations. For instance, to support the need to strengthen the leadership cadre of the movement, the Center started to

design and deliver the next generation courses in workers' education. These next generation courses were specifically intended to provide more technically trained leaders for the labor movement. This development in the workers' education program of the Center was particularly true by the second half of the 60s and into the 70s. This next generation courses covered training for the following: trade union treasurers and auditors, shop stewards (to strengthen the grievance mechanism of the trade unions), trade union secretaries, collective bargaining negotiators, worker educators, and trade union researchers. In other words, if the first generation of workers' education courses were primarily designed to support the building of the foundations of labor, the "specialized" courses were designed primarily to enhance the building of the leadership infrastructures of the workers' organizations.

It will not be difficult for anyone to imagine that as we were designing and delivering increasingly higher levels and more complex courses in the workers' education, these next generation courses were also competing for both technical and financial support, straining to the limits the Center's meager resources.

Even as the Center started to deliver its second generation courses called "specialized" workers education courses, it continued to run the "Basic" courses because more and more workers were getting organized. There was continuing clamor for basic trade union courses as new trade unions were getting organized every day. Perhaps this was partly a consequence of the numerous trade union organizers' courses the Center continued to undertake. Although the conduct of workers' education is really the primary responsibility of organized labor itself, many of the trade unions then, because of limited resources, could not undertake a sustained education program for their members. Many unions continued to depend on the support of ALEC. Our strategic plan for advancement of the Center's workers' education program counted on the assumption that we could perhaps, in the meantime, spin off the undertaking of at least the basic workers education courses to the trade unions. If this happened, this could have afforded the Center an opportunity to focus its attention and resources to the development and delivery of increasingly more advanced workers' education activities, which the better organized and bigger workers' organizations such as the newly formed national trade union centers wanted to see.

One senior official of TUCP observed that ALEC has become a "prisoner" of basic workers' education.

The flagship of the workers' education program of the Center, before, during and beyond my formal watch of ALEC, were the two sets of residential courses: the Residential Labor Leadership Institutes or RLLIs and the Asian Labor Leadership Institutes or ALLIs. The Center conducted an impressive number of these residential courses. The RLLIs were attended by selected labor leaders from the Philippine labor movement; while the ALLIs were attended by selected senior labor leaders from various Asian and Pacific countries - from Fiji to Pakistan. The ALLIs were made possible by support provided by the US Agency for International Development. In some ways, these residential training activities represented the apex of the workers' education program of the Center at that time.

In the interest of brevity, I will not dwell on the most impressive numerical count of the number of basic and specialized courses conducted, nor the number of participants that attended these courses. I will also skip mentioning the equally impressive statistical scores chalked out on the number of residential courses and the number of participants that attended the said residential institutes. But I would like to invite attention to the substantive thematic coverage of these residential courses because to my mind, the curricular contents of these residential courses were what really counted. After all, it was the subject matter contents of the residential courses that directly had an impact on the participants, and, indirectly on the unions they respectively represented. The coverage included discussions of topics like: trade unions and economic development; social and cultural values as they impact on negotiations and labor administration; industrial relations; workers' participation in decision making; trade unions and the population issues; and, workers' participation in management. In terms of methodology, as appropriate, case studies were used and resource persons from the University, the trade union movement, and the government were invited to discuss topics like structural adjustments and labor policies. Training films were also used as appropriate. At some stage, role-playing and simulation games were introduced in the collective bargaining training. Field observations were also undertaken. Participants to the residential courses of the Center have attended other training programs. During my extensive travels in the Asia Pacific region, as ILO's Regional Adviser on Worker Education, I felt

immediately at home, anywhere I went, because practically the top and senior leaders of the major trade union centers in the Asian countries were ALEC alumni. Many of them expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to attend the ALLI. In a way, my experience in the Asian region as an ILO Official validated the training objectives we set for our residential courses.

In the meantime, the Center continued to encourage the trade unions to consider building their own financial resource base to support their respective workers' education program. In this regard, some local unions in the desiccated coconut industry, used their collective bargaining contract to build an educational fund to be provided by the employer to the union. The union used this fund to finance their educational activities, including scholarship for union members. The Center also started, on experimental basis, charging fees for attendance of certain over-subscribed courses in the Center, such as the training for trade union treasurers and auditor. This was a much sought after course. For some minor unions, the Center offered incentive by supporting the participation of one participant from the union, if the union would shoulder the cost of the participation of another participant. Another scheme which was much sought after was training on labor laws. For this we ran the courses over some successive weekends, and the participants were charged attendance fees equivalent to going to a movie. Some workers who were not members of the trade unions even enrolled in the programs. This Labor Law program was undertaken with the help of the Law Center of the University. In some residential courses, we offered to pay for the attendance but we requested the union to shoulder the transport expenses of their participant from their home province to the Center and back.

In the 70s the Center started to tinker with the idea of developing yet another generation of workers education activities. We called it Policy Studies Circles. The idea was to develop a new platform for trade union leaders to get immersed into becoming familiar with the intricacies and techniques of policy formulation and development, and debate the values of a range of policy options on certain topical issues. At this point in time, the workers' organizations were basically reactive institutions in society. We at the Center felt that it would be best to assist in strengthening the trade unions' reactive responses. For instance, in reacting to wage or employment policies of government, the union should have its own considered wage and or employment policy which

would serve as basis for its own position vis-à-vis the government's or the employers'. A union wage policy could also be used as foundation for taking positions in bargaining for wage improvements at the workplace. What would be the unions' education policy, or, health and safety policy? And so on.

We discussed the idea in the Center, and explored the possibilities of its implementation with possible assistance from the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, in Netherlands. The ISS was excited about the possibility. However, because of the imposition of a repressive political architecture in the country at that time, the idea never saw the light of day. This was the same political dispensation which decreed that to strengthen the industrial relations system in the country it banned strikes. Had it not been for the unsupportive intervention of some highly placed public authorities, representing the authoritarian regime, we could have achieved the development and implementation of a third generation of workers' education activities in the Center's workers' education program. This third generation workers' education activities, could have provided a platform to give muscle to the unions' negotiating and interactive activities with other entities in society. It could also have shifted the negotiating posture of the trade unions from basically reactive to a more proactive stance. The development of this otherwise third generation workers' education course was, to my mind a need of the time, but the needed enabling political environment was not present. The project had to be abandoned.

Parenthetically, it should be pointed out that the founding father of this institution was truly farsighted in establishing this early workers' education program, within the framework of the University of the Philippines, to ensure the independence of the program from possible undue political interference. When the government decree banning strikes was issued, the Student Council of this University organized a symposium in the Little Theater of the Arts and Science building. As Director of the Center, I was asked to speak and give ALEC's position on the said decree. What I said in the student symposium did not perhaps square with the official line and I was personally asked to meet with the Minister of Labor at that time where I was gently requested to be more supportive. The other workers' education activities of the Center continued to be carried out during the difficult period, with full support of the trade unions and the University.

PART II: GROWTH OF TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES FOR WORKERS' EDUCATION PROGRAMS

This part discusses the encouraging and remarkable emergence around the second half of the 60s and into the 70s, of a plethora of external trade union based, and non-trade union based support for workers education in the Philippines and I presumed, in the other developing countries in this region. The Center welcomed this great push forward in the funding of workers' education. As if all of a sudden, the International Trade Union bodies – the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the World Confederation of Labor (WCL), and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) – started to pour out financial support to assist the education programs of their respective affiliates in the country. This development was most encouraging. Alongside the support of these International Trade Union bodies, the International Trade Secretariats also extended financial, and in some cases technical and even logistical assistance to their respective affiliates in the region. As if in recognition of the rich bank of experience and expertise available in ALEC, many of the workers' organizations launching their relatively better-funded educational campaigns, sought the support of ALEC. The non-trade union bodies that also entered the picture, included the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) based in the United States; the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) based in Germany, and the International Labor Organization (ILO), a United Nations specialized agency based in Geneva, Switzerland. There were other educational institutions which also provided scholarships to trade unionists to pursue more advanced studies. One was the International Trade Union Training Program at Harvard University in the United States. Others were: The Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Netherlands; and the Histadrut College of Labor and Cooperative and Cooperation, in Tel Aviv, Israel. Japan also extended assistance particularly logistical support to selected trade unions centers in the Pacific basin. The Australians started to organize special training courses for Asian trade unionists at the Clyde Cameron College, in Wodonga. Even the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) of the Philippine Government opened up a workers' education program within the framework of its Institute of Labor Studies (ILAS). It was most heartening to watch the trade unions themselves increasingly assume their primary responsibility for workers' education.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that many of the major funds flowing into the country, in support of workers education programs, originated from countries with relatively strong trade union movements which had developed their respective philosophies and traditions. It is understandable therefore that the sponsors of the funds coming into the country inevitably reflected the thinking of the trade unions in their respective home countries. For instance, the AFFLI was naturally associated with the insistence of the American labor movement that collective bargaining is the primary and only tool for protecting and promoting workers' interests. In contrast, the fund providers from continental Europe would also tend to project ideas more akin to the philosophy of the labor movement in the continent which believes that the labor movement is part of the mass movement in society and therefore the labor movement may establish linkages with other social groups in society as means of protecting and advancing workers' interests. As a consequence, the multi-sourced funding for workers' education in the country also generated a new market of ideas on how to advance the labor movement as a vital institution of the working people. The Philippine trade unions were presented with a smorgasbord of ideas on how best to move forward the labor movement, and the effective roles of trade unions in society. These ideas, like other commodities placed in the market, were consumed by the participants and the participating labor institutions.

But the need for more and higher education and training by the fast growing representative institutions of the working people — the trade unions— was equally expanding almost in exponential terms. This need was most reflected in the various ways in which the trade unions, as primary workers' institutions; and trade union leaders in particular, responded to the growing challenges facing the movement in various ways. For instance, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), with the assistance from FES, approached the Executive Development Program of the College of Public Administration, of this University, to organize for TUCP, an Executive Development course for its senior leaders and officers. Individual labor leaders at federation and even local levels also started to pursue advance academic education. Some leaders started working for their master's degree in local institutions of higher learning, some even at the ISS in The Hague. Other labor leaders attended the International Trade Union Program in Harvard University in the United States. One senior leader of a major labor federation started pursuing his doctorate degree in social sciences

because he was embarking on advanced studies so he could better help the organization he was serving. One major labor federation brought in a professional economist to assist the union in its bargaining negotiations. These are not by any means anecdotal accounts. I was witness to them. What did these developments tell us? They clearly pointed out that selected labor leaders, on their own individual initiative; and some workers' organizations, as organic or corporate entities were seriously upgrading their capabilities, through higher education and/or training, to effectively represent the working people in all kinds of interactive or negotiating arrangements to ensure amelioration of workers' condition.

ALEC, in the meantime, even from the mid 60s, started retooling its teaching and research faculties, and its library, in anticipation of its further upgrading of the Center's course offerings, and in the development of new and effective training materials. The research and teaching faculties were beefed up with new expertise drawn from the various social science disciplines. During this period, a member of the faculty of the Center went to the University of Wisconsin to pursue his doctorate degree in Industrial Relations. These new additions to the teaching and research staff complemented in important ways the services and expertise of the members of the faculty who were primarily drawn from the ranks of the trade unions. The synergy was powerful. The Center kept its ears close to the ground for important and timely information on the new and expanding training needs of the workers' institutions.

The expanding horizons of the trade unions reflected the widening roles they were playing in society. As will be noted in the discussion earlier of the evolution of the workers' education program of the Center - the basic and specialized courses in the Center workers' education program, were important in building the trade unions as primary representative entities of the working men and women. Except for some selected curricular topics in the residential institutes, the first and second generation courses were basically inward looking. It was in the residential courses that discussions of topics of more global import were taken up.

For ALEC, the drive to continually upgrade its workers' education course offerings was prompted by two compelling reasons: 1) the Center noted with satisfaction, that workers' organizations were gradually assuming responsibility for carrying out their own

education programs; and, 2) the Center observed, with interest, the ever broadening horizon of the unions' perceived roles in society.

In my considered view, this expanding set of roles of workers' institutions, is a function of the fact that as society develops, and becomes more complex, the political, economic, social, cultural, and other interests, which otherwise would remain fused, become more differentiated. This is manifested in the emergence of the multiplicity of more formally organized and institutionalized interest and cause-oriented groups, the trade unions being only one of such aggregations. These organized interests are what we refer to more commonly now as non-government organizations or NGOs.

These NGOs, including the trade unions, compete to establish a dominant position that would ensure their better access to, and share of, society's outputs that advance the standard of living of their respective constituents. In the process of competing to gain dominance these groups would establish strategic alliances, exercise popular pressure and establish networking arrangements, using appropriate kinds of linkages (enabling, supportive, facilitative, etc.).

This transformation in the nature of society projects the trade unions into the political scene, without them abandoning their very effective weapon of collective bargaining and organizing. The trade unions who were earlier operating outside the ambit of political decision-making suddenly gained access and found themselves as important players in an ever widening array of decision-making opportunities, including the legislative assembly. This development of course is also facilitated by the advent and growth of liberal participative democracy. The workers' organizations' perception of their roles in society shifts from primarily being exclusive to one of being inclusive.

As a foot note to the changes I have just outlined, and if you will allow me to make a slight digression, I would like to mention the raging and continuing debate in the ILO of the issue of whether other NGOs, not only organized labor, should also be represented in this only tripartite specialized UN agency. Some quarters argue that organized labor is a small minority in most ILO member countries. Some organized informal sector group, like rural workers and landless farm workers organizations are decidedly bigger, membership wise, than traditional labor organizations. To this

assertion the trade unions, who now sit in the ILO's Governing Body counter that the trade unions' representation in the ILO also represents the other NGOs.

Towards the second half of the 70s it was our considered view in the Center that the need of the time was for us to take a courageous and confident leap forward in the Center's educational course offerings. It was perhaps time also to extend some of its services to the other social institutions that were somehow increasingly getting associated with the interests of the working people. After all, the boundaries of the landscape of the trade unions' concerns were already starting to reach out to the other sectors of society, like the farmers, the informal sector workers, and the rural landless peasants, and others. After very serious deliberations, we embarked on a leap into the "why not". We then started to draw up plans to launch a formal course on labor studies and industrial relations opening up a completely new program area, initially relying on the Center's workers' education program. We sought, and obtained the support of the University. We knew then that we were not chasing rainbows. The approval of the academic program of the Center catapulted this institution into the mainstream services of the University. For ALEC, as it was still called until I left, the change in the Center also meant opening up a whole new vista. The rest is history.

PART III: GLOBAL PARADIGM SHIFT IN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

This part discusses the change, of titanic proportion, in the paradigm for development strategy, considered at the global level. This may not easily have been apparent to many at the time I left the Center, but it is important to recall and appreciate this development as we scan the changing scenario in relation to the changing and evolving role of organized labor, and let me add, other social groups. I refer to the radical change ushered in by the Timbergen Commission's recommendation to the United Nations on development strategies for the UN member countries, following its assessment of the first development decade of the 50s. Not many may have been aware that when the baby called Labor Education Center (LEC) was born in the early 1950s, the UN member countries were, at that point in time, pursuing implementation of the United Nation's First Development Decade. At the end of the said decade, the UN formed a high level

Commission to assess the impact of the development strategy pursued by the UN member countries during the so called First Development Decade. The evaluation by the high level Timbergen Commission of the UN's First Development Decade was most revealing. The Timbergen Commission observed that while economic development of the UN member countries advanced during the period under review, the rich became richer but the poor remained poor. The report therefore, recommended that it is crucially important that both social and economic development should be pursued with equal vigor, simultaneously. Social development should not be relegated to the trickle down effect of economic development, as some classical economists would tend to suggest. This recommended shift in development strategy for developing UN member countries ushered in a whole new ball park for workers' organizations in particular, and other social institutions in general. Today the trade unions and other social institutions are considered active players or partners in nation-building.

As one would therefore appreciate, the paradigm shift which underpins the harnessing and participation of the various players in nation-building, provided the most important over-arching cultural and political milieu under which we should appraise the evolution and development I mentioned earlier. This phase forms the global frameworks for examining and appreciating the importance of the two other phases I outlined earlier. In this regard, we can see that the birth of the Labor Education Center (LEC) in the early 1950s assumed the importance of the force of an idea whose time had come.

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