

Philippine Journal

OF LABOR & INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Vol. XVIII Nos. 1& 2 ISSN 0115-6373 1998

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Book Design & Cover

INKA Design Studio

Production Crew

Ferlina Carlos / Carlito Plastina

JUN 27 2001

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Isabelo delos Reyes and the Organized Labor Movement

Dr. Rene E. Ofreneo*

The Philippines has one of the longest histories of trade unionism in the developing world. In three years, she shall be celebrating the centennial of the **Union Obrera Democratica (UOD)**, hailed as the first labor federation in the country. In fact, organizing among the wage workers began much earlier as evidenced in the existence of the different workers' guilds or *gremios* since the 1870's (e.g., *Gremio de Escultores del Barrio de Santa Cruz*, *Gremio de Carpinteros*, *Gremio de Litografos* and *Gremio de Obreros de Sampaloc*). There were also some strikes recorded in the last decades of Spanish rule, mainly in the printing industry, such as the printing workers' strikes in San Fernando, Pampanga in 1872, the 1893 strike at an Escolta press and the 1899 strike at the press of the Revolutionary Government (Runes, 1983).

The objectives of this paper are limited: to analyze the reasons for the emergence of growth of UOD in the early years of American colonial rule and to assess the impact of UOD in the Development of the Philippine labor movement up to the contemporary times.

*Paper prepared for the International Conference on the Malolos Republic and Asian Democracy organized by the Philippine Centennial Commission. *Dr. Ofreneo is a Professor at the UP-SOLAIR.*

The rise of UOD amid difficult economic and political circumstances

The short but historic life of UOD lasting one year and four months (February 1902 to May 1903) and the even shorter but equally colorful involvement of Isabelo de los Reyes in direct labor organizing are well documented in the works of Ildefonso Runes (1983) and William Henry Scott (1992).

UOD was launched on February 2, 1902 by Isabelo de los Reyes and a group of worker activists from the printing industry led by Herminigildo Cruz, the leader of the 1899 strike at the press of the Revolutionary Government. After six months, or in August 1902, de los Reyes was arrested and imprisoned under an old Spanish penal law against efforts of workers' 'combinations' to increase the price or wages of labor.

In this brief period and at a time when the American troops were conducting mopping up operations against the remnants of the revolutionary Filipino army (Ople, 1958), UOD became a major threat to the American colonial authority almost overnight. An American labor chronicler, Victor Clark (1905), described the labor situation at the time of de los Reyes arrest as follows:

During a year (sic) of active propaganda the number of organized workers had risen to 20,000 in Manila and vicinity, and the number of federated unions to 150. Thirty of these unions were in the tobacco trades, representing the workers in different factories... Unions were not federated by industries, but had their sole bond of association through the general organizations. A number of strikes occurred... The first union to walk out was the hemp pressers, then followed the printers, and the last of all the tobacco workers. On August 15, 1902, when the tobacco strike had been on about 6 weeks, 4 delegates of a union were arrested for ordering a foreman and employees of the German Commercial Company's factory, who had resume work, to quit, at once, under threat of assassina-

tion if they refused... Reyes, who was president of the general organization, was considered the arch offender; however, and was arrested on August 17, under a Spanish conspiracy law still in force, and on the 29th of the same month was sentenced to four months imprisonment for violating the provision of the penal code prohibiting organizations for workmen to force up the price of labor. He served half this sentence, and then was pardoned by Governor Taft...

The rapid growth of UOD in half a year was made even more dramatic by the difficult economic and political circumstances obtaining in 1902.

As documented in the 1903 American Census of the Archipelago, the population of the country then was just a little over 7 million and the most urbanized area, Manila, had just a little over half a million residents and had 537 agricultural farms covering 738 hectares. The colony was predominantly agrarian, with hardly any industry to speak of. The biggest employers were the sugar mills and tobacco factories, followed by ship and boat building and a long list of small-scale household based and low-technology undertakings employing 5-15 people and producing household consumer items for the domestic market. According to the census report, the principal household industries were clothmaking and hat weaving, which were conducted all over the country. Thus, the economic and organizational base for union formation — big and modern industry — was virtually non-existent. This probably explains why the early workers' organizations that were formed were the *gremios*, which were organized based on skills or crafts. Of course, given the Spanish penal prohibition against workers' combinations, workers bonded together under the more acceptable medium of organization, the guild or the mutual aid society, which was also widespread in Spain and other European countries in the 19th century. Moreover, the *gremios*, dominated by Chinese artisans and skilled workers, were apparently tolerated by the Spaniards who used the *gremios* as taxation units (Clark, 1905).

The political environment for worker organizations was also extremely difficult. The law governing labor organization, Article 543 of the Spanish Penal Code, was outrightly hostile to unionism:

Those who combine to increase or decrease the price of labor or regulate its conditions abusively shall be punished, provided the combination has begun to be exercised, with arresto mayor(i.e, imprisonment for not less than one month and one day nor more than six months).

Aside from the above Spanish Penal Code provision as the law governing labor organizing there were no other labor laws, particularly on union registration, worker organizing, collective bargaining and dispute settlement. Thus, those who joined UOD in 1902 did so under a terrible cloud of uncertainty as the American colonial authority and some complaining employers might at any time crack down on them, arrest them based on false charges, or simply haul them to prisons based on the above law on combinations as what happened to a number of UOD activists including de los Reyes himself. This explains why the UOD propaganda and documents were often written in very guarded and ambivalent manner; on one hand, UOD documents and speeches would thunder against injustices and the economic plight suffered by the workers, and on the other, the same documents and speeches would appeal to the American authority for their understanding and sense of justice. This also partly explains why the grassroots activists of UOD chose to elevate two *ilustrados*—Isabelo de los Reyes and later, Dr. Dominador Gomez—to the Presidency of UOD; moreover, they also tried to recruit other Filipino *ilustrados* to become officers, with limited success.

Some of the notable achievements of UOD in its brief existence are as follows (Scott, 1992, pp. 29-34):

- sending of petitions to the American colonial authority for the adoption and implementation of European- or American-style labor laws, including the recognition of May 1 as a public holiday and the passage of an eight-hour labor law;
- holding of regular Sunday meetings that had become big social and cultural gatherings of the members and their families;
- successful campaign against the recruitment of Japanese to operate rickshaws: and
- dramatic show of labor strength and unity through UOD's participation in the Fourth of July parade, where de los Reyes gave a brief

address to officials in this wise: "I bring here the message of our respectful adhesion to the American government, from whom we expect our liberty".

However, UOD's greatest success were in organizing and in conducting strikes, mainly for the purpose of raising wages. The Sunday meetings drew masses of new recruits. The original core of printing workers (lithographers, printers, bookbinders) were joined by the barbers, tailors, workers, carpenters, cigar-makers (female), clerks and office workers, draftsmen and painters, dressmakers and seamstresses, drivers (cocheros), sailors and shipyard workers, stevedores, hemp pressers and even by some farmers from Bulacan.

The UOD strikes came in waves. The first wave came in April when workers in major newspapers and printing and lithographing industry struck in one establishment after another until their concerted action became virtually an industry-wide strike. This strike action resulted in 25 per cent wage increases in the industry, which naturally emboldened workers in other industries to undertake similar strike actions to improve their wages. And in June, after a decision of UOD giving its local affiliates full freedom to decide when to strike or not, Manila was swamped by flood of strikes — by the butchers, the leaf strippers, the stevedores, the hemp workers, the printers (again!, but over non-compliance by employers with earlier agreements). In July, the whole tobacco industry was in crisis as the major tobacco factories — Oriente, Philippine Tobacco Company, Tabacalera, Germina, Insular, Maria Cristina, and La Minerva — were hit by strikes involving thousand of workers and gravely affecting the economy itself. By early August, the labor situation was seen by both employers and the colonial authority as out of control as strikes were everywhere leading the media to conclude the UOD had declared a general strike. Accordingly, the office of the Governor-General William Howard Taft plotted to dampen labor unrest by arresting on August 16, 1902, Isabelo de los Reyes and sentencing him on August 29 to four months under the Spanish Penal Code.

The post-de los Reyes developments

The detention of de los Reyes did not stop UOD. Dr. Dominador Gomez, UOD's official physician and a member of the Filipino propaganda movement in Spain, took the place of de los Reyes. Gomez tried to sustain the militancy of the UOD, which was renamed *Union Obrera Democratica de Filipinas (UODF)*. The anti-imperialist works of the noted nationalist playwright, Aurelio Tolentino, also found enthusi-

astic support from UODF and further reinforced UODF's nationalist bent.

The union's organizing drives, strikes and other activities of UODF culminated in the mammoth celebration of May 1, 1903. Some 50,000 marchers converged in front of Malacanang Palace demanding, among other things, the official recognition of May 1 as Labor day. This rally and the growth of UOD did not sit well with the American Governor-General William Howard Taft. Three weeks after the rally, the books and accounts of UOD were confiscated and used as the basis for the filing of charges of sedition, brigandage, swindling and embezzlement against Gomez. This ended the short but colorful life of UOD/UODF.

In the meantime, there was a change in American Labor policy. Shortly after the arrest of Gomez, some American trade unionists from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) visited the Philippines advocating a shift from political to welfare or economic unionism. This call found a responsive chord in Lope K. Santos, a UOD supporter who organized the *Union del Trabajo de Filipinas*. The *Union* was inclined to cooperate with the colonial government and minimize labor's involvement in political affairs. Its officers even sent their constitution and by-Laws to Governor Taft for approval (Carroll, 1961). However, given the background of Lope K. Santos as one of the original supporters of UOD and a close friend of Crisanto Evangelista, a radical labor leader, it would appear that the stance of UTF vis-à-vis the American colonial authority was essentially a tactical measure to ensure the continuity and survival of the labor movement.

The demise of UOD and rise of *Union del Trabajo* ushered in a new period of tolerance to unionism by the colonial government. In 1908, the Bureau of Labor was created. One of the functions of the Bureau was to legalize trade unions. Thus by the second decade of American rule, there were over a hundred registered unions.

This shift in the official policy vis-à-vis unionism — from repression to toleration — was due largely to the changing political climate in the colony as well as in the United States. In the early years, the unions were outlawed for they were suspected of being part of the separatist and insurrectionary movement. The American colonial government, which took instructions from the expansionist Republican administration of Theodore Roosevelt, was busy attending to the general pacification of the archipelago. By 1907, however,

ing to the general pacification of the archipelago. By 1907, however, there were no longer any major internal threats to the colonial government, while Filipino politicians had focused their attention on how to win independence peacefully through the cooperation of the United States herself, starting with the gradual Filipinization of the government service initiated by Taft himself.

The revival of political unionism. Ten years after UOD, political unionism staged a comeback with the formation of the *Congreso Obrera de Filipinas (COF)* under the leadership of Crisanto Evangelista (UIF, 1982). COF revived the demand for national independence when it denounced the AFL's opposition to Philippine independence and when it proclaimed its goal of "*lalong ganap na kalayaan*" (greater freedom). In contrast to the first decade of American rule, the second decade was more favorable to labor organizing. The generally anti-labor Republican Party lost to the Democratic Party of President Woodrow Wilson, who was known to be friendly to organized labor in America and who even took advice from some of the labor leaders. It was under his administration that the US Department of Labor was set up. Not surprisingly, during the term of Wilson, the Filipinization of the colonial government, this time under Governor General Francis Burton Harrison, accelerated.

From 1913, up to the end of World War II, Crisanto Evangelista and his followers dominated the labor movement. They founded the *Partido Obrero* in 1924, the *Katipunan ng mga Anak Pawis ng Pilipinas (KAP)* in 1929, and the *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP)* in 1930. At each turn, the socialist and anti-imperialist demands of Evangelista became more and more pronounced. Evangelista's radicalism was first shaped by the union education he received from the founders of UIF and UOD. His espousal of radical unionism was strengthened by his various trips to the United States, China and the Soviet Union, where his socialist awareness deepened.

In a way, the UOD tradition, particularly its advocacy of an independent Philippine Republic and a socialist order side by side with the demand for better wages and working conditions for union members, never died despite government efforts to suppress the militant labor groups like what happened in the 1930's when Crisanto Evangelista was arrested and the PKP outlawed, in the 1950s when the Congress of Labor Organizations (CLO) was outlawed and its officers arrested en masse, and in 1970's when the martial law government suspended civil and labor rights and put the militant labor groups either under surveillance or behind bars.

The rapid expansion of UOD in 1902: an interpretation.

What accounts for the great drawing power of UOD among the working masses? This author would like to advance three major reasons.

The nationalist/socialist ideas of de los Reyes. The first explanation can be found in the person of Isabelo de los Reyes himself, more specifically in the mixture of nationalist and socialist ideas that he advocated, which somehow found a fertile soil among the activists and mass followers of UOD, many of whom were simply seeking social and economic betterment in life. Others, who are veteran supporters of the Katipunan and who share the same resentment of de los Reyes against the new colonizers, were obviously looking for practical guidance in political work after the collapse of the revolutionary army before the mighty American force.

What exactly were the socialist ideas that de los Reyes brought home from Spain, after a short period of imprisonment in the notorious fortress in Barcelona (as a punishment of his reformist and anti-political writings), and a year or so of working with political rebels and radicals in Spain? The answer to this is vague. The only thing clear is that the Montjuich Fortress was a notorious bastille where Marxist, socialist anarchists, republicans, political reformers and other rebels of Spanish society were thrown and that de los Reyes naturally got exposed to the imprisoned socialist and rebels. Runes (1983), a veteran labor journalist and chronicler, wrote that de los Reyes shared his imported books with Herminigildo Cruz and other UOD officers, including those written by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Proudhon, Malatesta, La Salle, Danton, Victor Hugo, Marat, Mikhail Bakunin, and "others of their kind".

The above foregoing list of authors indicates de los Reyes' exposure to a great variety of radical and socialist thinkers in Europe, including Marxists and socialist anarchist like Bakunin, who had tremendous influence among the Spanish labor organizers in the last quarter of the century. According to Sima Lieberman (1986), Spain at the turn of the century was still largely agrarian and backward compared to Germany and England and tied in so many ways to "resilient neofeudal institutions". It is in depressed agrarian societies such as Spain where the Philosophy of socialist anarchism as articulated by Mikhael Bakunin, who opposed all kinds of expression of statism and bureaucracy, tended to get large following among the masses of rural and urban workers, particularly the semi-proletariat

such as the *murcianos* of Barcelona who were driven to the city by rural poverty.

It was not clear if de los Reyes was a true follower of Bakunin or not as he did not leave any extensive tract or writing on his views on socialism and who among the socialist dialogues inspired him most. Nevertheless, he hinted some biases in favor of socialist anarchism, when he described, 30 years after, his contact with Ramon Sempau, his cellmate at the Montjuich Fortress. Sempau was a Spanish journalist and an avowed anarchist who tried to assassinate the officer-in-charge of Montjuich Fortress. On Sempau, de los Reyes expressed the following sentiments (cited in Scott, p.15):

This Sempau was very well educated: he knew the scientific names of the plants of the Philippines by heart, and later he translated Rizal's "Noli Me Tangere" into French. In his fight with some hundred police agents, he showed an absolute lack of fear. His very name caused terror in Europe. Yet in reality he was like an honest and good natured child yes, even a true Christ by nature ... I repeat, on my word of honor, that the so-called anarchists, Nihilists or, as they say nowadays, Bolsheviks, are the true saviors and disinterested defenders of justice and universal brotherhood. When the prejudices of these days of moribund imperialism have disappeared, they will rightfully occupy our altars.

However, by lumping the anarchists and the Bolsheviks together, it was obvious that de los Reyes was not fully updated on the great ideological or organizational debates dividing certain organization-oriented Marxists like Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and the voluntarist anti-state socialist anarchist like Bakunin, apart from their common opposition to the reformist path taken by the social democrats like Ferdinand La Salle. It seems that de los Reyes was into the advocacy of socialism in a general way, that is, promoting socialism without articulating any clear or detailed agenda of action on how it shall be built, or even won. Nor did he have a clear outline of the nature and structure of this socialist model save for

the fact that it should be built on the ashes of capitalism, at the end of the class warfare between labor and capital.

Going back to UOD, it appears that de los Reyes and UOD, like the socialist anarchists, relied so much on mass spontaneity as vividly shown in the fateful UOD decision in June 1902 to allow each affiliate union or *gremio* to decide when to strike or not. But at the same time, de los Reyes was deeply attracted to ideas of cooperative association and mutual aid, ideas articulated by the French "socialist utopians" and which were also popular among the Spanish urban and rural workers (Lieberman), e. g., Fourier's idea of groups of people engaging in collective work and living in cooperative communities and Saint Simons idea of associationism and new social ethic. Thus, it should be noted that the 20 Principles of UOD written by de los Reyes himself look like a list of principles adhered to by modern day cooperatives, e.g., membership subscription, primacy of the general assembly in major decision making, strict rules on disbursements, etc. The only principle which made reference to union work was item 1 of the said principles and which reads as follows:

1. With this title, and with the approval of the authorities, a society is hereby constituted which has for its object the amelioration of the conditions, salaries, and treatment of printers, bookbinders, and lithographers, etc., the placement of those dismissed, and the assurance of the future of their families and free education of their children, by means of a closed and fraternal democratic union of the associates, through the practice of savings, cooperative industry, and our people's love of civilization and progress.

Of course, de los Reyes was also a nationalist and a consistent fighter for political reforms and independence. In his youth, he was active in the propaganda movement against Spain, writing articles about Spanish abuses and clerical injustices, which was the reason for his banishment and incarceration at Montjuich in Barcelona, Spain. When he was released from Montjuich and had to stay in Spain for a while, he became a one-man propaganda machine against the emergent American imperialism. And when the Americans did come to replace the Spaniards, he channeled his energies to the campaign for Philippine Independence and documentation of the rich cultural heritage of the Filipinos. The Sunday and other meetings of

UOD would also have special cultural presentations like the 'seditious' plays of Aurelio Tolentino, which were highly critical of American colonial rule. Part of his amazing reform agenda was the founding of the new Filipino Church, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, which was launched ironically at the height of UOD's strike campaign on August 2, 1902, and which frightened the American colonial establishment even more.

The Role of the Pioneer Labor Leaders. There is a second explanation for the popularity of UOD — the sincerity, integrity and militancy of the pioneer labor leaders, who helped De los Reyes in building up UOD.

Some of these pioneer labor leaders were active in the pre-American *gremios* such as Herminigildo Cruz. Thus when de los Reyes arrived in the Philippines in 1901, a grouping of unions in the printing industry was already taking shape through the *Union Litograficos y Impresores de Filipinas* (UILF). It was a group of labor leaders in the UILF who approached de los Reyes for advice on how to set up a cooperative based on memberships' savings or contributions. However, de los Reyes expanded the workers initiative by suggesting instead the formation of the *Union Democratica de Litografos, Impresores, Encuadernos y Otros Obreros*, which the media quickly shortened to *Union Obrera Democratica*.

The leaders of the printing industry led by Herminigildo Cruz were recipients of the radical books brought home by de los Reyes. These books, particularly that of Marx, had a great and immediate influence on these leaders so much so that the UIF adopted the Marxist slogan: "The emancipation of the workers must be achieved by the workers themselves" (Runes, 1983).

As the Secretary of UOD, it was Herminigildo Cruz who kept the day-to-day affairs of the Federation. Cruz had taken a liking for the ideas of Marx and became one of the Filipinos to have outside contacts under the American period with socialists in other countries. Later, one of Cruz' young activists in the printing industry, Crisanto Evangelista, would also imbibe the socialist ideology and would emerge as the most important labor leader before World War II.

Some of Cruz' contemporaries at UOD were members or supporters of the Katipunan and the Philippine war of independence like him. This should explain the ease by which de los Reyes became the head of the workers' movement overnight and the genuine ex-

pression of admiration and affection by the UOD officers and members to de los Reyes.

Social Movement Unionism. The third explanation for the popularity of UOD was its character as a social movement that relies on the spontaneous mass actions from below and which integrates union life with the requirements of social and cultural life.

Thus, the Sunday meetings of UOD became an occasion not only for proselytizing on the evils of the capitalist and colonial forces but also providing the workers and their families opportunity to enjoy the works of Filipino playwrights like Aurelio Tolentino and cultural life.

It was, in fact, in one of the special meetings of UOD in August that Isabelo de los Reyes launched the new Church, the IFI. This, in a way, completed the multi-faceted vision of freedom that de los Reyes had for the country: political, economic, cultural and religious freedom from the dictation of outsiders by developing the capability of Filipinos to develop their own industry, institutions and capabilities in various fields of human existence.

In the absence of laws and state guidelines, workers waged strikes in a spontaneous manner and through direct collective bargaining with the concerned employers, without the presence of any third party mediator between the parties. This only heightened the sense of purpose and empowerment among the UOD affiliates and their rank-and-file members. Often, workers in a given area or industry would coordinate their action, thus raising the power of the strike several times.

UOD and the Philippine Trade Union Movement: Some Conclusions

As the first federation in the Philippines operating under a highly repressive atmosphere, UOD was remarkably radical. It did not confine itself to the espousal of the economic demands of the workers. It articulated the need for political independence and sought legal recognition for basic labor rights. The rhetorics of UOD's leadership even went as far as denouncing the "cruel war between capital and labor".

Despite the arrest of UOD's leaders and outlawing of UOD/UODF itself, the tradition of labor militancy focused on both the protection of individual workers rights and establishment of a truly

independent Philippines did not die. The tradition of UOD/UODF would find renewed expression in the succeeding labor organizations — in the Congreso Obrero de Filipinas (COF), Kapatirang Anak Pawis (KAP) and Collective Labor Movement (CLM) before the war, in the Congress of Labor Organizations (CLO) after the war, in the Philippine Association of Free Labor Unions (PAFLU) in the 1950's in the National Association of Trade Unions (NATU) and Pambansang Kilusang ng Paggawa (KILUSAN) in the 1960s, in the Bukluran ng Mangagawang Pilipino (BMP) and the Trade Unions of the Philippines and Allied Services (TUPAS) in the 1970's and in the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) and the various affiliates of the Labor Advisory Consultative Council (LACC) in the 1980's. Even the moderate groups like the Federation of Free Workers (FFW) and the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) have gone beyond economic unionism at the plant level by espousing since the mid-1980s a comprehensive program of societal and political reforms such as mass housing for the workers, national sovereignty on the foreign debt issue, broader workers' representation in government, etc.

On the other hand, the national government would tend to pursue both policies of repression and reform to contain militant trade unionism. After the outlawing of UOD/UODF, the American colonial government adopted a benign policy of toleration and registration of trade unions. In the 1930s and 1950s, right after the crackdown on militant labor groups, the government enacted laws seeking to mediate disputes between labor and capital and establishing certain labor standards such as the minimum wage law, health and safety, social security, etc. Clearly, the establishment of labor institutions protective of labor such as the minimum wage standard, laws on unionism, collective bargaining, social security, etc. was a product mainly of past labor struggles.

The UOD is alive!

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