

INTERVIEW

WORKERS AS CULTURAL ACTIVISTS

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Darlina and Lourdes enter the union office giggling, nervous and shy. One whispers to the other, "Sana kausapin tayo sa Tagalog" (I hope she speaks to us in Tagalog). But after a few minutes we are at ease with each other.

The off-white union office is small, but bright and airy, filled with windows, a huge white board, a round table, chairs, benches, a desk and lockers. This afternoon it is also packed with cheerful and excited young people chattering away. It is rehearsal time for the singing group. Somebody from what they call the "Quezon City Trade Union Cultural" has come to teach them new songs and help them rehearse for a performance the next day at a seminar of a sister trade union. They are all members of SIKLAB (Sining at Kultura sa LabTech), the cultural arm of the LabTech union.

The singing starts. The tiny room reverberates with songs sung with great joy and spirited grace. They are about love of country, how women should rise up and out of their silence, how salesladies are exploited and forced to look seductive, why the US bases should go. Some songs are solemn, others lively and humorous. The young people sing with such energy Darlina, Lourdes and I can hardly hear each other. Darlina and Lourdes are distracted by the music, humming or singing along and casting wistful looks at each other and at the singers. For, not so long ago, they too were part of this group.

They were both 19 when they started working at LabTech, Lourdes in 1981 and Darlina in 1983. LabTech is Japanese-owned. It manufactures semi-conductors which are shipped back to Japan where all the raw materials come from. The work demands manual skill, patience and, above all, good eyesight, the basic requirement for employment.

Darlina is the sixth of 10 children. When she was in high school, her father died of a stroke. Her mother could no longer

afford to send all the children to school. They were living in Manila at the time and Darlina had to go back to Iloilo and live with relatives to finish high school. After graduation she came back to Manila and found work at LabTech. In the evening she took courses in industrial engineering at the Central Colleges of the Philippines. She had just completed her second year there when she married her childhood sweetheart. She could no longer afford to go to school and stopped. But she dreams of returning to her studies after maybe 10 years, getting a degree in education and settling down to a career of teaching until she retires.

Lourdes, on the other hand, is the fourth of eight children. Her family was also too poor to send all the children to college, but everybody managed to graduate from high school. Lourdes told her father that she was willing to give up her chance to get a higher education so her brothers could go to college. At the time, she says, she believed that men should be given all the opportunities to make something of themselves because they would eventually become heads of families, while women would be taken care of by their husbands.

Lourdes' views have changed since. She now thinks that women have as much right as men to develop themselves. One of her brothers has a bachelor's degree in criminology and is now gainfully employed. A sister completed foreign service, but went to Japan as an entertainer. Lourdes herself would have wanted to become a nurse.

Lourdes has been with the factory for nine years and earns a basic daily wage of P142.72 and more when she works overtime. Darlina, who has been working at LabTech for seven years, earns P138.72 a day. They say that everybody, male or female, starts with the same basic pay and gets a raise every year. It was not always the case. The union had to fight long and hard for it.

The LabTech workers started unionizing in 1981 with the help of the KMU (Kilusang Mayo Uno). Many signed up and officers were elected. Expectedly, the union met with a lot of resistance from management. The officers were given special privileges, such as rest and recreation at the Japanese house on the compound and free bowling games. Most of the officers soon signed retraction papers. The union president and a few other officers, however, refused to be coopted. Lourdes herself was called to the management office and asked to retract her membership. She was warned that the pamphlet used by the union was the same one used by the New People's Army. She shudders at the recollection, but at the time that didn't scare her. The union president was sitting next to her and kept whispering to her not to sign.

It wasn't until 1983 that the union was firmly established. After six months and one day with the factory, an employee becomes a regular worker and automatically becomes a member of the union. There are now 560 members (90 percent are women) headed by a very able and pleasant young woman named Rebecca.

In 1986, the union had a month-long strike to protest unfair labor practices and unreasonable strictness and to demand fair wages. Darlina and Lourdes were on the picket line. Darlina had to leave in the middle of the strike to have her first baby. Both women recall the financial hardship, how they could't pay the rent for months and had to go into debt. At least, they say, the strike was not a violent one.

Darlina and Lourdes feel that the union can be credited with improving their working conditions. For instance, the collective bargaining agreement won for them five days maternity leave with full pay from the company in addition to the regular 45-day maternity leave during which they receive a minimum of P4,500 from the Social Security System depending on their salary scale and premium paid. They are also entitled to 18 days sick leave and 18 days vacation leave, paid in cash if unused, and emergency leave for five days in case of natural calamities or death in the immediate family.

Still, the women of LabTech have to put up with something their male counterparts probably do not: sexual harassment. In this case, the harassment comes from the Japanese production manager who likes to put his hands where he should'nt. The women wear their identification cards on their chests. Sometimes he examines and handles them too thoroughly.

When SIKLAB was formed in 1984, Lourdes and Darlina were among the first to join. They loved to sing and enjoyed the fun and camaraderie. They were young and single, and rehearsals after work and performances in other places provided them an active social life.

At first, SIKLAB was just a convenient way to provide ready entertainment during the quarterly assembly of the union. Then they had a three-day live-in seminar at St. Scholastica's College with other cultural groups from other trade unions. They studied and discussed national issues. Two students from the University of the Philippines taught them nationalist and "activist" songs. It became clear to Darlina and Lourdes and the others that cultural groups are effective ways of educating workers in a most creative way.

Darlina and Lourdes are no longer with SIKLAB. They wax nostalgic over those days of cultural activism and deeply regret that they can no longer be active in the group. Now that they are married they no longer have the time for rehearsals and performances for

other trade unions. Their priorities have changed and their families take much of their time.

Yet both Darlina and Lourdes have husbands who share household chores. Darlina's husband does the laundry and washing up, and she does the ironing and cooking. At first she was worried that he might feel embarrassed to be seen washing clothes but he thought it was nobody's business what he did. They share in the childrearing. Although she holds the purse strings, she makes him do the marketing. That way, she says, he is aware of how tight the budget is.

Before he moved to the Middle East to work, Lourdes's husband did the laundry and the cooking while she took care of their two children, one now two years old and the other three months. Her one complaint was his nights out with his *barkada*, or group of friends. Like Darlina's husband, he too handed over his pay to his wife but kept wondering why the money was never enough. Lourdes and her family live with her mother and two sisters. Her mother looks after the children when Lourdes is at work.

Darlina's husband works in an electrical supplies factory. Darlina earns more than her husband and it is a sensitive issue, an irritant and a frequent cause of misunderstanding. Because of financial difficulties, they sometimes had to send their four year old son to stay with his grandmother in Iloilo.

Lourdes's husband went to vocational school and finished a course in automotive repair, but couldn't find a steady job that paid well. They could barely make ends meet. In desperation, they were forced to borrow heavily from relatives and friends to raise P17,000 so Lourdes's husband could work in Saudi Arabia. He got a job as an auto mechanic. They have paid off almost all their debts. After eight months in Saudi Arabia, Lourdes's husband still wonders why the money he sends home never seems enough. Lourdes hasn't heard from him in a long time. There's a war going on in the Middle East. She doesn't know when he's coming back.

Both Darlina and Lourdes say their main problem now is economic. They wish they had more money for recreation. P100 saved at the end of the month is a real luxury for them.