

philippines: 350,000 Workers Celebrate May Day

More than 350,000 workers joined this year's May Day marches and rallies organised by the KMU (Kilusang Mayo Uno - May 1 Movement) in Manila and major provincial centres. In Manila, the press reported, 60,000 workers converged from seven assembly points across the metropolitan area for a rally at Liwasang Bonifacio. They protested against the anti-labour laws of the Marcos dictatorship and the ever-present United States interference in the economic and political life of the Philippines. The march was joined by 100 foreign delegates to an international solidarity conference being held in Ilagan City on the main island of Luzon. Other large marches were reported in the Bataan Export Processing Zone in Central Luzon (20,000), in Bacolod City on the island of Negros (30,000), and Davao on Mindanao (15,000).

The marches and rallies took place despite the denial of march permits, arrests of union activists, and other harassment from the Marcos regime. It was reported that three farmers were murdered by the military on their way to the march in Central Luzon.

Union upsurge

The May Day demonstrations come on the crest of an upsurge in militant union strikes. According to the April 1985 issue of the Filipino Workers' Times, the Philippines Ministry of Labour and Employment released figures showing an all-time record of 282 strikes in 1984, involving twice as many workers as in the previous year. Despite intensifying repression this trend has continued into 1985, the Times reports, with as many as 65 strikes, involving 18,000 workers, in the first 10 weeks of the year. Already, seven striking workers or their supporters had died this year in attacks on picket lines by police and company goons - the latest being killed outside a Manila factory on May 6.

At the centre of the May Day actions, especially on the island of Negros, were the workers of the sugar mills and plantations organised in the National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW). The Philippine sugar industry, 60 percent of which is concentrated in the province of Negros Occidental, has been devas-

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tated by the slump in world sugar prices and by domestic consumption. On top of this, opposition politicians charge that Roberto Benedicto, a Marcos supporter who heads the Philippines sugar marketing authority, has been using imported sugar to profiteer and force down sugar prices (and payments to sugar planters) on the domestic market.

Bosses' offensive

The plantation and sugar mill owners are attempting to place the burden of this crisis on the sugar workers, through slashing wages and laying off tens of thousands of plantation and mill workers. The Far Eastern Economic Review reports that, "Most planters now pay their workers on a piece-rate basis to cut costs, so workers get only a third of the otherwise mandatory P32 [R3.00] daily wage for agricultural workers." And the Filipino Workers' Times reports that more than 200,000 sugar workers are expected to be idled for the next six to eight months until the new milling season starts.



photo: Filipino workers celebrate May Day

The plantation owners have also sought to use terrorism to undercut union organisation in the plantations and mills. KMU leader Calito Rallistan gave the example of a National Federation of Sugar Workers organiser who was murdered after he began to organise the union among his co-workers on a plantation on Negros. "He was pinpointed by the plantation's owner. Up to now his head has not been found. He was beheaded. This happened also on a plantation on Mindanao." It is in this context that the sugar workers' federation organised 50,000 sugar workers for a May Day march on Bacolod City, in Negros.

The National Federation of Sugar Workers plays a central role in the KMU on a national level. Its president, Roberto Ortaliz, was elected the new secretary-general of the KMU at the March 9-10, 1985, KMU special congress. He replaced Crispin Beltran, who had been detained by Marcos for more than two years until he escaped and went underground in late 1984. At the congress it was announced that the KMU membership now exceeds 500,000, making it the second-largest trade union federation after the pro-Marcos Trade Union Congress of the Philippines.

Mindanao "people's strike"

On the southern island of Mindanao, where one-third of Marcos' armed forces are deployed against the guerilla fighters of the Moro National Liberation Front and the New People's Army, the May Day action spilled over into a two-day "welgang bayan" (people's strike), according to reports. The strike was in protest against the effects of the economic crisis on working people, and demanding the demilitarisation of Mindanao. It involved industrial and transport strikes, barricades, demonstrations, and a student-teacher boycott, and paralysed all economic activity. The Marcos regime responded to the "welgang bayan" with predictable violence. Two people were killed, 14 arrested, and four injured by army patrols.

(Manila correspondent, May 1985)