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Center for the
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Asia Pacific:

PERSPECTIVES

an electronic journal

Volume VI · Number 1

15 May · 2006

Special Issue: **PHILIPPINE STUDIES AND THE CENTENNIAL OF THE DIASPORA**

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Asia Pacific: Perspectives is a peer-reviewed journal published at least once a year, usually in April/May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.

* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

An Interview with Philip Vera Cruz, Spring 1971

by Sid Valledor

Abstract

An interview prepared and conducted with Filipino-American agricultural labor leader Philip Vera Cruz' college speaking engagements in the Pacific Northwest in the spring of 1971. It is an edited transcription of a tape recorded personal interview on his life, held at his home in the fall of the same year. For over thirty years the tape recordings and Vera Cruz' writings remained dormant. With mixed emotions Valledor, a retired labor leader, prevailed upon himself to let the world know of what Philip Vera Cruz had to say outside the context of the Great Delano Grape Strike as he understood it. The interview essay is one part of the farm workers movement story as seen from a unique historical capacity. The writings, interviews, and recordings occurred mostly during the 1969 – 1971.

On that historic day—the signing of contracts at Forty Acres by the table grape growers with UFWOC at the Roy L. Reuther Memorial Building, the union's headquarter—all seemed well, at least for that moment. Thereafter, much of the union's attention focused on the administration of the contracts; the crisis in the lettuce fields, particularly in the Salinas area; the accompanying boycott, and political participation in its struggle for recognition and standing at the legislative level.

In this interview, conducted more than six months after 29 July 1970, Philip speaks of the union's difficulty in dealing with the conspiratorial relationships of the lettuce growers, Teamsters, government, and the courts. He notes also the difference, as he sees it, between the students of the past and the present generation. Finally, Philip calls for the participation of those most concern with the welfare of people, emphasizing "that all the basic principles being fought for by the people...are all the same."

"How difficult is it to strike?"

"We in the union, tried very much to get the growers to negotiate with us through the formal way of picketing. But the strikes in the fields are very, very different from the strikes in the factories. The difference is this: when you strike the farmers and the growers, you have to picket a great number of square miles of fields. And really, we don't have enough people to go to all the numerous passageways and look for those workers in the vineyards.

"These workers usually get inside and you don't see them. The only way that you could tell that they were there were the presence of their cars because they cannot get them inside. And, sometimes they do hide them there, too. Now, the failure of our union to get the growers to negotiate with us by picketing has forced us to shift our tactics to boycott. And, it was really a hard thing to do. But, it was the only alternative left for us. We had been striking for about five years. When

finally the grape boycott proved effective the growers shifted their tactic; all wanted to sign at the same time. Well, you can imagine the difficulties that faced us as it related to the administration of the contracts. Our lack of people, particularly those who did not know what they were doing, just caused us all kinds of problems, confusion, and misunderstandings."

"What is the situation with the current lettuce strike?"

"It's been difficult. The growers signing contracts with the Teamsters have created complications. When Bud Antle, Inc., the giant lettuce agribusiness, signed a contract with the Teamsters Union, Local 890, only five percent of the workers had voted for it. That was the first time and the last time that the contract between Bud Antle and the Teamsters was ratified. The contract has been renewed eight times with the workers never notified of the terms of the contract. They didn't even know whether they had a union or not. All the time they thought they had no union.

"The lettuce workers felt justified going on strike. You see, in our understanding of the democratic process, in order for a union to duly represent a group of workers, fifty-one percent of the members must ratify the contract. Furthermore, one million dollars from the Teamsters Pension Fund were loaned to the Bud Antle Corporation. According to our lawyers, this was technically immoral and illegitimate. A union cannot represent the interest of both business and workers.

"When the lettuce workers went on strike, we proved we have the workers. But, we are dealing with a very big and well-connected adversary. The Bud Antle Inc., which farms 43,000 acres all together, is second only to Inter-Harvest in the production of lettuce. It sold 17,000 acres to Dow Chemical with Dow Chemical in turn returning 3,000 acres with lettuce. C.F. Weaver, an official of one of Dow Chemical's subsidiary corporations, became a member of the board of directors of Bud Antle. There is also a styrofoam container company jointly owned by Bud Antle and Dow Chemical. The extent of the economic power of Dow Chemical is worldwide in 23 countries, 44 offices and 55 manufacturing locations. The sales of Dow Chemical products amounted to about two billion dollars.

"Because of the economic power and connections of Bud Antle, Inc., it was able to dump its lettuce onto the U.S. Government. The Defense Department spent \$750,000 in the first quarter alone of 1971. The amount exceeded the previous fiscal year's purchases of Bud Antle, Inc. lettuce. You can see that the neutrality of the Defense Department, as claimed, is false. We appealed to the American public that this tax money should not be spent to break legitimate strikes and deny the rights of workers to establish or form unions of their own choice.

"There's no way of saying how much boycott pressure we should put on Bud Antle. What we need to do is continue hitting and hitting 'till Bud Antle comes around and signs a contract. We have also appealed to the GIs and protested in the form of demonstrations at military installations."

“What about the courts?”

“You see, because of the conspiracy between Bud Antle Corporation and the Teamsters Union, our lawyers have filed suit to the extent of ten million dollars punitive damages, and I think it comes to about \$425,000 for each client.”

“And the impact of the courts?”

“Gordon Campbell, the local judge in Salinas, has a very anti-union record. Thirty years ago, when there was some agitation for unionization of the workers, this same judge deputized every white male to arrest anybody involved in organizing the workers. Today, he has placed an injunction that we are appealing. He has required the union to post a bond of \$2.75 million. The union does not have that much money. That is why Cesar had no choice but to go to jail because he refused to comply with the injunction. The injunction interferes with the freedom of speech and assembly. Our lawyers have therefore filed suit against Bud Antle, Inc. and the Teamsters Union on the grounds of unconstitutionality.”

“It seems to me UFWOC is not building for a garden variety union.”

“That’s correct. We have the service center operating, helping people to do their income tax, welfare, things like that, little things. They are simple things, but people who are workers on the farm are not educated enough to know or understand how to go about those things. So, it attracted people, and then, if somebody got sick, then there’s the clinic. We also have a credit union; one share cost five dollars. Its purpose is to help people financially. Workers are able to borrow for only a one-percent interest rate. I’ve been the president of the credit union for two years now and we have helped a lot of people. We also have the idea of a co-op, although for now we have just begun with the gas station. Finally, we plan to build in the near future a retirement village. I think this idea will be very significant. Because you see, the growers who use workers all their lives will discard them as they reach the age of retirement.”

“It seems the Forty Acres concept is a new way of doing things.”

“Well, that’s true. We’re in the formative period of the union. That’s why people who have the right vision and the right hearts should be coming around into the union to help us.”

“What do you think of the young people today?”

“There is a great difference between the students of the past and the present generation. You know, I have been here over forty years and I have seen them, and really, they have changed. College students before were all dressed up with neckties, clean-shaven, and even had haircuts. But, they were too busy looking nice, and they forgot the most important things in life. These students in the past, all they wanted to do was get good grades in school, have good recommendations, and land good jobs with good money. That was all the ambi-

tion of the people before, with exceptions of course of some, but the numbers were not very significant. This time, these young people, they are not concern very much about what kind of pants they’re going to wear because their minds are directed towards human values. Their values have changed from material things to something worthwhile. And, their values center on human beings and not on business or getting good homes, etceteras. There’s a complete turn around of values.”

“Why do you think this is so?”

“I think the young students today are more realistic because all the good things they learned in school and in their churches do not really coincide or correspond to what they see outside. Now, it is very amazing to know that despite the country’s huge Gross National Product, there are thirty million poor people. I think we cannot make the whole world believe that the American form of government or the American society is the ideal society that the world should follow when you have thirty million poor people.”

“Do you think there is an ideal society?”

“I think that all depends on how you make it. We really cannot exactly get everything perfect, but at least we can get closer to a system where people could be served with their needs in life. Now, right and wrong has not been static: it has been changing from time to time. Why? Because right and wrong is based on the needs of people. What is important is that the principles must suit the needs of the time and the people, otherwise the principles are mere empty words.”

“What do you call yourself?”

“Well, I don’t call myself anything, but I’m working for the benefit of people, and I don’t pay attention to labels.”

“Is the world in revolution?”

“Whether we like it or not, it’s going on. Whether this revolution starts from the bottom or the middle class, the principles that we are fighting for are identical. They are the same. We are allies in order to make progress for the human race. And, we in the union, we could not build a union by farm workers alone. We get the food, the clothing, and the money from the middle class. We get the knowledge, the skills, and the professional services from the middle class because you cannot get a professional from under the vineyards. If he has those skills and knowledge and professional training, well, he’s not picking grapes.

“And so, here, I would like to emphasize that all the basic principles being fought for by the people in the revolution from the bottom to the middle class are all the same. And, we should cooperate. And, I wish that those people, who are most concerned with the welfare and benefit and protection of the people and who are for peace, would come around and help us build the union.”

Sid Valledor is Visiting Fellow at the University of San Francisco's Yuchengco Philippine Studies Program. He is the author of an upcoming book, *The Original Writings of Philip Vera Cruz*, the first in a series on Americans with a Philippine heritage. He was the special assistant to Larry Itliong, then Vice Director of United Farm Workers Organizing Committee of the AFL-CIO and National Director of the Boycott. Valledor has served as a trustee and director of UBAC and on the advisory boards and task force of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone, Board of Education, Civil Service Commission, and the Pilipino Studies at San Francisco State University.