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## Building Global Labor Solidarity Today: Learning from the KMU of the Philippines

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# Building Global Labor Solidarity Today: Learning from the KMU of the Philippines

## Abstract

New labor movements are currently emerging across the Global South. This is happening in countries as disparate as China, Egypt, and Iran. New developments are taking place within labor movements in places such as Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, Mexico, Pakistan and Venezuela. Activists and leaders in these labor movements are seeking information from workers and unions around the world.

However, many labor activists today know little or nothing about the last period of intense efforts to build international labor solidarity, the years 1978-2007. One of the key labor movements of this period, and which continues today, is the KMU Labor Center of the Philippines. It is this author's contention that there is a lot unknown about the KMU that would help advance global labor solidarity today.

This paper focuses specifically on the KMU's development, and shares five things that have emerged from this author's study of the KMU: a new type of trade unionism, new union organizations, an emphasis on rank and file education, building relations with sectoral organizations, and the need to build international labor solidarity.

## Keywords

Labor Solidarity, Kilusang Mayo Uno, KMU, International Labor Solidarity

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## Cover Page Footnote

Kim Scipes, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Purdue University North Central in Westville, Indiana, USA, and a longtime labor activist engaged in building international labor solidarity. He is the elected Chair of the Chicago Chapter of the National Writers Union, UAW #1981, AFL-CIO. He has published monographs on the radical wing of the Filipino labor movement—KMU: Building Genuine Trade Unionism in the Philippines: 1980-1994 (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1996)—and on the foreign policy program of the AFL-CIO: AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage? (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010 hardback, 2011 paperback). He served as an elected Board member for Research Committee 44 (Labor) of the International Sociological Association from 2006-2010. He has just edited a special thematic issue on "Global Labor Solidarity" for Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society, which has been published as Vol. 17, No. 2, June 2014. Scipes has published extensively in the US and around the world. He can be reached through his web site: <http://faculty.pnc.edu/kscipes>.

## Introduction

New labor movements are currently emerging across the Global South. This is happening in countries as disparate as China, Egypt, and Iran. New developments are taking place within labor movements in places such as Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, Mexico, Pakistan and Venezuela. Activists and leaders in these labor movements are seeking information from workers and unions around the world. It is exciting to see global labor solidarity develop.<sup>1</sup> While personnel and/or resources might be in short supply for these new labor movements, one thing that should be available is information—not prescriptions saying “you must do this, you must do that,” but rather here are some of our experiences and our thoughts on them; feel free to consider and use anything that might be helpful today.

However, many labor activists today know little or nothing about the last period of intense efforts to build international labor solidarity, the years 1978-2007. During these years, we saw the development of a totally new type of trade unionism—social movement unionism<sup>2</sup>—as developed by labor movements in Brazil, the Philippines and South Africa, respectively. We also saw powerful labor movements develop in Poland and South Korea. All five of these labor movements played central, if not *the* central role, in helping to overthrow the military dictatorship in their country: they were some of the leading proponents of popular democracy in the world!

One of these labor movements from which the concept of “social movement unionism” was developed was the KMU Labor Center of the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> It is this author’s contention that there is a lot unknown about the KMU that would help advance global labor solidarity today.

The *Kilusang Mayo Uno* or May First Movement was created on May 1, 1980, as an effort to unite a number of labor movements that had emerged in various regional political economies of the country into one nation-wide organization. That the KMU still exists—34 years later, almost to the day—suggests they have done something right. That they have survived incredible opposition from the elites and the military of their country—including the assassination in 1986 of their national Chairperson, massive numbers of arrests, torture and/or deaths, as well as economic dislocation, etc.—suggests there is much to be learned from their experiences and, at very least, suggests the need for their experiences to be shared with labor movements and researchers around the world.

This paper focuses specifically on the KMU’s development, and shares five things that have emerged from this author’s study of the KMU: a new type of trade unionism, new union organizations (alliances), an emphasis on rank and file education, building relations with sectoral organizations, and the need to build international labor solidarity. Although the KMU’s activities are largely unknown to many current researchers, they have experiences that this author believes would be of major interest today.

## Overview<sup>4</sup>

Why did the KMU develop? What were the conditions that caused workers to create it? What has enabled it to survive and grow?

There were three reasons to found the KMU. First, workplace conditions were terrible, with management domination so strong that workers were almost completely at the mercy of their bosses. Second, the traditional unions had sold out workers. And third, there was a clear need for a workers’ organization that would organize against foreign domination; as long as the country remained subservient to foreign interests, it would be unable to develop and confront the problems that faced its people.

KMU was founded on May 1, 1980, during the dark days of the Marcos Dictatorship. The seven founding union organizations had 35,000 members under collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) at the time, with an additional 15,000 as members but without CBAs.<sup>5</sup> After 10 years, there were 350,000 members under CBAs, and another 400,000 workers that were under the KMU but without CBAs.<sup>6</sup>

But there is obviously more to the KMU than just size or even membership growth. How did the KMU survive the repression of a dictator—including the arrest and detention of its chairperson, general secretary and almost 100 top leaders? How could the organization continue after the assassination of its

subsequent chairperson, facing massive human rights violations and almost total opposition from the military and the ruling class? Where did the KMU find the strength to be able to lead and win its second national general workers' strike within nine years of its founding?

Part of the KMU's power to endure is related to its basic principles of being genuine, militant and nationalist. A top leader interviewed in 1986, who did not want his name used, explained what these principles mean to members of the KMU:

By 'genuine,' we mean that the KMU is run by its members. The members are given all information and decide the policies that run the organization. By 'militant,' we mean that the KMU will never betray the interest of the working class, even at the risk of our own lives. The KMU believes workers become aware of their own human dignity through collective mass action. By 'nationalist,' we believe the wealth of the Philippines belongs to the Filipino people and that national sovereignty must never be compromised. The KMU is against the presence of the U.S. bases (quoted in Scipes, 1987: 12).

In other words, the KMU is class conscious, believes that workers learn more from mass struggles than from leaders cutting back room deals, and is determined that Filipinos should control the Philippines.

The statement about never betraying the interests of the working class, even at risk of KMU leaders' own lives, is not hyperbole; many KMU organizers, leaders and members have been arrested and/or killed. The assassination of KMU Chairperson Rolando Olalia in November 1986 demonstrated the risks involved in being a genuine trade unionist, even for those highest in the organization.

### A New Type of Trade Unionism

A key aspect to the KMU's survival and growth is the organization's political concept of "genuine trade unionism." Genuine trade unionism (GTU) extends the scope of trade unionism beyond mere relations in the workplace; it also includes struggles over the political economy of the nation and its internal social relations (see Scipes, 1999). KMU-affiliated unions have developed this concept to the greatest extent in the Philippines, although it is not limited to them.

Genuine trade unionism opposes domination from without; it is against imperialist interference in the Philippines from particular nations such as the US or Japan, as well as from institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the AFL-CIO.<sup>7</sup>

It is this involvement in the debate over the future direction and shape of the nation—together with the KMU's increasing ability to interfere with economic production due to its position in the nation's workplaces—that makes the KMU such an important subject for examination and understanding.

Further organizational strengths are to be found in the internal processes within KMU-affiliated organizations: the KMU is committed to union democracy and accountability to its membership. It requires sacrifices from leaders and fights internal corruption. The KMU is controlled by its membership and not by any other organization from the left or the right.

Along with being genuine, militant and nationalist, developing genuine trade unionism and being democratically controlled, the KMU has developed because of three other factors: an organizational structure that combines vertical and horizontal connections, an extensive educational program, and its relations with other sectoral (peasants', women's) organizations.<sup>8</sup>

### Organizational Structure

The first factor has to do with the particular structure in which the KMU is organized. The KMU is organized both "vertically" with centralized national federations, and "horizontally," by workers' alliances: this organizational grid overlays the entire organization.

Eleven national federations—similar to national or international unions in North America—are affiliated with the KMU. These are hierarchical organizations, with decision-making at a higher level superseding those made at lower levels. Each federation contains at least ten local unions.

These federations have a general membership; they organize any workers they can, although most federations concentrate on one or two particular “industries.” The National Federation of Sugar Workers-Food and General Trades (NFSW-FGT) concentrates on sugar workers. *Ilaw at Buklod ng Manggagawa* (IBM: Light and Unity of the Workers) is concentrated among employees of the San Miguel Corporation, a giant beer and food conglomerate. The Genuine Labor Organization of Workers in the Hotel, Restaurant and Allied Industries (GLOWHRAIN) focuses on workers in hotels and restaurants. The Drug and Food Alliance of the Philippines (DFA) is in pharmaceuticals. The Alliance of Nationalist and Genuine Labor Organizations (ANGLO) emphasizes garments and textiles, while the United Workers of the Philippines (UWP) and the Association of Democratic Labor Organizations (ADLO) are in garments and shoes. The Southern Philippines Federation of Labor (SPFL) focuses on mining and the wood industry, while the National Federation of Labor Unions (NAFLU) is in mining and longshoring. The National Federation of Labor (NFL) concentrates on the service industry and banana plantations, and the Organized Labor Association in Line Industries and Agriculture (OLALIA) is concentrated among agricultural workers. The situation results in some duplication, but it also gives local unions a choice of federations to affiliate with, ensuring more responsive leadership.

Each federation provides legal assistance, orientation, directions for education, and plans of action—in coordination with the KMU—to their local union affiliates. In particular, federations give crucial assistance in workers’ struggles to form local unions. They also help to gain recognition through winning certification elections and successfully completing collective bargaining agreements.

Local unions can affiliate with a federation by one of two different ways. A previously-organized local union may join a federation “indirectly.” A group of workers seeking help in organizing may join “directly.” George Aguilon, secretary general of NAMAHEMIN, explained that: “In reality, there is no big difference. The only difference is that if you have indirectly affiliated, you can [leave the federation] at any time; if you are directly affiliated, you must wait until the CBA [collective bargaining agreement] expires before you can disaffiliate.”<sup>9</sup>

The large majority of local unions are directly affiliated, meaning they must remain with their chosen federation throughout the life of the contract. Since the passage of the Herrera Law (RA 6715) in March 1989, this is a five-year period.

Besides additional membership, status and, therefore, power, affiliation brings in dues for the federation. For example, before it disaffiliated from the United Lumber and General Workers of the Philippine (ULGWP), the union at Greenfields was the ULGWP’s largest local union. Greenfields is a garment factory in Metro Manila, with 2,500 union members and another 500 workers paying agency dues for the union’s representation of them with management. At Greenfields, workers were paying monthly dues of 10 pesos, three of which went to the local and seven to the federation. In addition to these dues, the federation won a P10,000 a month education fee in the contract, which the company paid to the federation. From this one factory, the federation was receiving P31,000 a month, over one million pesos over a three-year period.<sup>10</sup>

However, despite the hierarchical organization of these federations, they are decentralized as much as possible. Federations are broken into island-wide and region-wide groupings, with the power to make decisions delegated to the lowest possible level of the organization.

The decentralized structure diffuses power throughout the organization. Immobilizing the top leaders will not stop the organization. Marcos’ effort in 1982 to cripple the KMU by arresting 69 key leaders, including the chairperson and the secretary general, failed because of the KMU’s decentralized organization.

Additionally, there is also an organization of women workers, the *Kilusang Manggagawang Kababaihan* (KMK: Women Workers’ Movement), which is affiliated with KMU and is another type of alliance, this one based on gender. The KMK has 20,000 members. It has specifically been challenging women’s oppression within the workplace, society, and the unions. In 1989, its program focused on

winning greater maternity leave benefits for all women, establishing day care facilities in workplaces, ending sexual harassment, and solving health problems of women workers in the factories.<sup>11</sup>

Besides the hierarchically-structured federations and the KMK, there are the alliances. Alliances are “horizontal” coalitions of workers from different workplaces and unions, and are organized on the basis of geography, industry, or company ownership. The goal of each alliance is to unite workers for economic gain; provide self-defense from military harassment; win political demands outside the workplace; and give GTU (genuine trade unionism) education to all members.

Alliances are a totally new development in Filipino trade unionism, having just been established in 1982. The first alliance, AMBA-BALA, was created by the overwhelming female workforce in the Bataan Export Processing Zone (BEPZ) in response to military repression against strikers at the Inter-Asia Company during June 1982. Flor Collantes of AMBA-BALA described events that led to the creation of that KMU provincial alliance:

The workers had gone on strike to protest intensification of their work; previously each worker operated four machines in the textile plant; management increased this to six. The military intervened against the strikers, using fire trucks, truncheons, and mass arrests in an effort to break the strike.

Although strikes in the zone were illegal, other workers realized that if they allowed the military to break the strike, then the military could break any strike. Further, they realized that BEPZ was a key component of the IMF/WB/Marcos development strategy for the country, and thus union organization would have a much greater importance than in less strategic areas.

The women organized clandestinely on the job, in the company-provided dormitories, and in the community. Workers in every factory in the zone were mobilized. On June 4, 1982, 26,000 workers walked out in support of the nine union organizers that had been fired by Inter-Asia and the 54 arrested picketers.

This was the first general strike in any export processing zone in the world and it was successful: the strike was won, the union organizers reinstated, the people in jail released, and the first alliance, AMBA-BALA (literally meaning “AIM-BULLET”), was born (quoted from Scipes, 1987).

Each type of alliance organizes differently. Geographical alliances combine unions on the basis of locality and are the most powerful; these alliances can be formed on national, island, regional, province, city, or even district levels within particular cities. Industrial alliances unite unions located in the same industry, such as health care, transportation, or mining. Conglomerate alliances join unions in multi-site workplaces owned by the same company. The industrial and conglomerate alliances focus more on workplace issues, while geographical alliances tend to focus on larger political issues—but transportation alliances have always been very involved on the political levels as well. Additionally, while most alliances are affiliated with the KMU, each alliance often includes unions from outside the KMU.

### Education

In conjunction with an innovative organizational structure that reinforces its member unions, the KMU has a very developed trade union education program. It serves as perhaps the key component in leadership development. And not only is the program extensive, but the leadership of all KMU organizations strongly stresses the education process.

Known by the general name of “genuine trade unionism,” the KMU education program is composed of three different courses: PAMA, GTU, and KPD.

PAMA is a one-day introductory course, which is short enough that organizers can give basic educational training even on picket lines. In this course, workers are taught not only trade union rights and responsibilities, but political economy as well. Surplus value is explained in a way all workers can understand. The term “imperialism” is demystified and shown to be a key explanation for the economic degradation and poverty of their country. Gaining national sovereignty is clearly shown to be an important part of the workers’ struggle for liberation.

The three-day GTU course goes into greater detail. Workers discuss the problems of labor. They examine and analyze the differences between genuine trade unionism on one hand, and “yellow” unionism—whether of the “bread and butter/rice and fish” version or its more collaborationist form—on the other. They focus on the history of the Filipino labor movement and previous efforts to develop genuine trade unions. And workers discuss the struggle for national and working class liberation.

The third course, KPD, propagates the national democratic program. Originally part of the GTU course, KPD has been further developed on its own. This focuses attention on the struggle for national democracy, which includes joining with different political forces fighting for national sovereignty. The goal of national democracy is the establishment of a truly independent country and a national democratic coalition government, based on the various sectors of society, such as peasants, workers, fisherfolk, women, urban poor, students, etc.

Though these courses were formally developed in Metro Manila at the Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research (EILER), a church-based organization, they were created in response to the high priority placed on member education at the KMU’s founding congress in 1980. These courses were developed in the field—on picket lines and at union meetings—and brought back to Manila for integration and development by EILER. They were then taken back into the field, tested, and then further modified when necessary.

Education centers have been established throughout the country. Each KMU federation has an education department, as do most KMU geographic alliances. Making information available and accessible to workers is their goal.

This information is not just for KMU members. In Bataan, workers demanded that all members of the provincial alliance—even unions affiliated with other labor centers—be given genuine trade union education. This seems to be the case in most alliances. Also, in some areas, independent educational programs have been established, such as the Visayas Institute for Research and Trade Union Education in Cebu, which serves any union in the Visayas region.

This education process is one of the main differences between KMU organizations and those controlled by other labor groupings. The KMU tries to develop workers’ understanding in order to get them involved in confronting their problems and the problems of the country. It uses every opportunity to educate workers, whether trying to win certification elections during respective “freedom periods” or helping workers take control over their own union to make it militant.

Key to this education process is the way it is run. Rather than just telling workers what they should think or do, KMU educators have developed curricula that enable workers to share their thoughts on various issues and discuss alternatives. It is through open discussion and input from the instructors that workers educate themselves and each other.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of this education simply cannot be exaggerated. It brings workers together, away from the worksite. It allows them to think about and discuss what they want and how they can best achieve their goals. It also allows them to interact with each other, building solidarity within the organization.

The most important result is the general empowerment of workers. Once workers have been through an education course, they get a real sense of themselves and what they are doing. While this sounds abstract, it comes through concretely in their determination in their particular struggles; maintaining a twenty-four hour picket line for over a year during a strike is common.

These courses also encourage workers to develop their own courses. For example, the IGMC Workers' Union in BEPZ developed a course for their members on the capitalist relations of production in their firm. Why is production arranged in the manner it is? What is the company trying to do? How are they able to do it? What can the union do to strengthen itself? Those are some of the questions that the course is focused on. The union had put all of its 700-plus members through the course by early 1986.

However, there is another aspect of these education programs that cannot be overlooked: they are key to building *internal solidarity* within each federation, local union, alliance, or other type of labor organization. In other words, KMU leaders recognize that a worker or a group of workers joining a union does not make them union members in any way beyond in name only; they must be *consolidated* as union members, which means they have to complete at least the organization's basic educational program. It is this recognition that internal solidarity must be *created*, not assumed, that has led to organizational development, which in turn has played an essential role in helping KMU survive the difficult circumstances with which it has been confronted.

### Relations with Other Sectoral Organizations

In the Philippines, national democrats within each sector of society—such as workers, peasants, fisherfolk, women, urban poor, and students—have developed organizations to meet their specific needs. These are known as sectoral organizations.

Joining with sectoral organizations to fight for demands that would benefit the entire population of the Philippines, and refusing to limit KMU's interests only to workers and their problems, is another key factor in the KMU's development. Benefiting from this cross-sectoral unity, the people of the Philippines have been able to develop a tactic called a *welga ng bayan*, or “people's strike,” that is even more powerful than the almost-mythic “general strike” in industrialized countries.

A *welga ng bayan* begins with a general workers' strike, but it is much more. In addition, all public transportation is stopped, all shops and stores are closed, and community members set up barricades to stop still-operating private vehicles or they join workers on their picket lines.

The first *welga ng bayan* took place in Davao City on Mindanao in 1984. The concerted actions of the people paralyzed most significant economic activity in response to increased military operations and brutality on the island. Two more island-wide people's strikes were launched during 1985, again protesting the militarization of the island. The third people's strike was so successful that when the island's military commander asked the leaders to call it off after one day, they refused. “We'll call it off when we reach our objectives,” a leader told him.<sup>13</sup> The *welga ng bayan* lasted three days.

How did this tactic develop? Erasto “Nonoy” Librado, Secretary General of KMU-Mindanao, explained that leaders from different sectoral organizations had noticed very little response to their efforts to win their particular demands; and they began talking to see if together they could all be more successful.<sup>14</sup> Their efforts paid off with a tactic that, while difficult to mobilize properly, was incredibly powerful when launched.

In May 1985, the various sectoral organizations, including the KMU, organized into a national alliance called the *Bagong Alyansang Makabayan* (BAYAN: New Patriotic Alliance). BAYAN, which means “people” or “country,” is organized on a national level and it has local chapters in most major urban areas throughout the country.

The next significant people's strike took place in Bataan Province against the Westinghouse-built Bataan Nuclear Power Plant in 1985. This power plant, built on the side of a volcano in an active earthquake zone, was intended to supply electricity to the U.S. military bases, Clark and Subic, and to the export processing zone in Mariveles. The *welga ng bayan* was described:

Several major protests have been launched against the plant. The largest was the three-day province-wide strike in June 1985. Eight towns were brought to a standstill. All banks, shops, schools, public transport, private businesses and government offices shut down. Even fishing boats in the local port refused to put out to sea. Workers from



the industrial free trade zone, where the factories of the multinationals are located, marched for two days to join the protests. Workers blocked all roads to the nuclear power plant and grappled with armoured cars sent to clear a way through (Watts and Jackson, 1986).

The first nationwide *welga ng bayan* was launched in August 1987 in response to an oil price hike by the government. Although called off early in response to a military coup attempt, the effort had immobilized 95% of the country's economically-central cities beforehand. Interestingly, the next military coup attempt took place after plans for another nationwide people's strike had been announced but before it could be launched in December 1989. Another nationwide *welga ng bayan* was carried out in October 1990.

*Welga ng bayans* prove that progressive Filipinos can gain much more together than they can alone. *Welga ng bayans* also show KMU's recognition that labor must be involved in national issues that affect other sectors because these issues also affect workers as well.<sup>15</sup>

### Building International Labor Solidarity

The KMU has placed a high interest in developing international labor solidarity. As explicated in an earlier paper, the KMU has a six-part project designed to create international labor solidarity, with the centerpiece being the annual International Solidarity Affair (ISA) (Scipes, 2000).<sup>16</sup>

Each year for the ISA, the KMU invites workers and labor leaders from around the world to travel to the Philippines for an extensive 10-day program, revolving around the celebration of International Workers' Day (May 1). This is seen as a way to develop both international labor support for the struggles of the KMU and to help build international labor solidarity between Filipino workers and workers from other lands; hence, it is more than a one-way process. During this program, "visitors" are given an in-depth "exposure" to the day-to-day reality of Filipino workers. While the program includes formal ceremonies with national dignitaries and meetings with KMU leaders, its centerpiece is going out into the various regions of the Philippines and meeting workers and, at times, their families. This takes place at their workplaces, picket lines and sometimes in their homes.

While working as a printer and being a member of the Graphic Communications International Union, AFL-CIO, I participated in the 1988 ISA along with workers and labor leaders from Australia, Belgium, Canada, England, France, Germany, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States. (There were also Japanese workers there but because of translation needs, they had a separate program.) By sharing parts of an earlier article where I discussed my experiences regarding the ISA (Scipes, 2000), one can get a better idea of how this works in practice.

Preparation was extensive. Prior to traveling to the Philippines, visitors received an orientation program that acquainted them with the country, and suggested what they would experience and what they might like to take with them. Preferences for where each person might like to travel or what they were specifically interested in seeing were solicited. In addition, visitors received information about how they should act while in workers' communities, what type of clothing was appropriate, and how they should donate money to an organization should they desire to do so.

Once we were in the Philippines, we received a considerable amount of information. The KMU had prepared "orientation packets" for each visitor, in which we were given an overview of the national situation and the KMU's position on specific national issues such as the US military bases, and specific information on the region that we would visit.

The importance the KMU placed on the International Solidarity Affair was evident. There was an impressive opening ceremony in which some of the visitors actively participated. Senator Wigberto Tañada of the Philippine Senate gave the keynote address. KMU Chairperson Crispin Beltran and other leaders gave speeches, welcoming us to their country. The event was covered in the national media. And throughout the entire 10-day program, visitors had extensive access to high-level KMU leaders.

After the formal ceremonies, the visitors were informed where we would be visiting. The group

was split up by destination and our respective guides gave us a “situationer” (situation report) for the area in which we would be traveling. I was traveling to Mindanao with Philip Statham, an Australian trade union official, and we were given a three-hour situationer by KMU-Mindanao Deputy Secretary General Joel Maglunsod, who had been flown in from Davao City to brief us and to serve as our guide.

Once in the provinces, after introductory meetings with local area leaders, we were taken to meet with workers at various workplaces. During our 1988 visit to Davao City, we were taken to meet hotel, dock and garment workers. At each stop, we got an overview and analysis of their situation and an update on their current activities. We were encouraged to ask any questions we might have, and the union members shared their personal experiences and tried very hard to get us to understand. But we also gave reports on the situation for workers in our respective countries, and talked about how our labor movements were confronting the problems in our societies. The workers asked us questions: why did we come to the Philippines, and particularly Davao City? They wanted to know why we were willing to take serious risks—the vigilante movement (i.e., death squads) was stronger in Davao City than any where else in the country, and quite obvious with numerous “check points” throughout the city—to come learn about their struggles?<sup>17</sup> As we talked, we got a sense of each other and one could also see solidarity being created. One man even gave me the address and phone number of a sister in California and asked me to call her and tell her he was ok—I was pleased at how much this message meant to her when I later contacted her and delivered it.

After spending a couple of days in the more urban parts of the city, we went to a rural part to visit workers on a banana plantation. These workers had been waging an intense struggle to maintain their union, with Army units all around the area in this supposedly “rebel-infested” area. In fact, union officer Peter Alderite had been hacked to death by vigilantes using bolo knives the year before right outside the union office on the plantation. Other officers lived in the banana trees for months following the killing, although things had been a little quieter for a while.

We had an extensive program at the plantation. We received an in-depth briefing by the union president, who told us both about the union struggles and the labor process for growing bananas. We then spent hours walking around the plantation, talking to workers as they worked, who explained their tasks. We covered the whole range of the growing process, from planting to boxing the bananas for shipment. After spending the day in the workplace, we were invited by workers to visit their “community” and to eat with them. We met spouses and children, and visited their homes. We shared information about schooling in the different societies and various things from our lives. Although very poor, they shared what they had and related to us as equals—they conveyed their strong sense of self-assurance and confidence that comes from having stood up for themselves and their colleagues. We then traveled to another part of the plantation and talked with Lisa and Philip Alderite, the widow and son of the slain union leader. It was a particularly intense conversation since we met on the first year anniversary of Peter’s assassination. Afterwards, we returned to the community where people shared some homemade coconut wine called “tuba.” We spent the night on mats on the floor and had breakfast in the community before going to other parts of the plantation and meeting other workers.

After several days in Davao City, we returned to Manila where we rejoined the other visitors. On May Day, we marched with approximately 150,000 workers through the streets of the city to Luneta Park for a spirited rally and speeches. The day after, we spent time sharing each group of visitors’ particular experiences, and hearing the details of an armed attack on marchers in Laguna Province on May Day. The ISA ended with a *dispedida* (departure party). Among other things, we sang songs of struggle from our respective homelands. It seemed an excellent way to end the ISA.

Having a sense of what actually takes place during these visits allows one to see that there is a second part of this communications strategy: our presence signified to those workers that their lives, their struggles, their victories, their losses and their pain was important to workers in other parts of the world. And that we were willing to spend considerable amounts of money to travel to the Philippines and then take certain risks to show our concern and make these connections illustrated to them that this was a serious concern, not something taken lightly. It is from this second part that one can see the ISA as a

*mutual* communications process, a spiral, in which we learned from each other: it surpasses a one-way flow of information.

### Conclusion

The men and women of the KMU have built a strong and powerful organization. The labor center is based on a philosophy of being genuine, militant and nationalist and, from that philosophy, have developed the concept of genuine trade unionism. Coupled with this has been a democratic decision-making process, a structure of federations and alliances that is mutually reinforcing, an elaborate and emphasized education program, alliances with other sectoral organizations, and a determination to build international labor solidarity.<sup>18</sup>

The KMU has unified organizations at a number of different levels into a national labor center. And it has survived for over 14 years, something no previous radical labor center has accomplished in the Philippines.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, in its first 10 years, the KMU has led two nation-wide general workers' strikes and constituted a major force in a nationwide *welga ng bayan*, while continuing regional and provincial efforts. These national efforts have been a combination of KMU unions, unions from other labor groupings, and sectoral organizations.

The KMU, along with its allies, has built itself into a powerful economic and political force in the Philippines.

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<sup>1</sup> Previous efforts to build cross-border labor solidarity, especially in the post-World War II period, have been done under the rubric of *international* labor solidarity. When this has happened, much of this has been between two labor movements at a time, and has generally proceeded from the stronger to the weaker, in a clientelistic manner than a solidaristic one; and this has generally been from labor movements in the Global North toward labor movements in the Global South (see Waterman, 1998). And that is when this solidarity was not really labor imperialism (see Scipes, 2010a, b).

This writer believes we are in a new period, when labor solidarity can include multiple labor movements, can originate in the South or the North, and be directed toward either southern or northern unions, and tends to be based on solidaristic relations. Accordingly, he argues these efforts should be considered *global* labor solidarity to differentiate them from previous efforts (Scipes, 2014b).

<sup>2</sup> Coming out of an international debate with long-time labor activists/scholars Peter Waterman, Eddie Webster and Rob Lambert, Kim Scipes developed the most theoretically advanced definition of “social movement unionism” (SMU) (Scipes, 1992a, b).

Completely unaware of this debate, Kim Moody (1997)—basing his definition off the work of Gay Seidman (1994), who was also not involved in the international debate—applied SMU to North America, using the same term for a qualitatively different social phenomenon than which it had been initially developed. This has subsequently caused great confusion among labor writers.

I use Scipes’ definition throughout this paper, and not Moody’s.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is the result of research conducted by this author during six trips to the Philippines between 1986-1994, and published in his subsequent book (Scipes, 1996). Because this book was published in the Philippines, very few labor researchers outside of the Philippines and Australia are familiar with it, and fewer have read it. Other than Lois West’s (1997) book, there has been little published on the KMU since the late 1990s, meaning their efforts are all but unknown to many of today’s researchers. This author currently has a manuscript currently under review, whereby he tries to extract lessons to be learned from the KMU’s experiences regarding building international labor solidarity.

All research herein is from the 1986-94 period. The author hopes to travel to the Philippines in May 2015 to update his original study.

<sup>4</sup> This section on the KMU is heavily based on Scipes, 1996: 9-19.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with KMU Chairperson Crispin Beltran, May 2, 1990 in Manila. All interviews referred to herein were conducted by this author in the course of my research on the KMU.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a member of KMU’s International Department on April 16, 1990 in Manila.

KMU’s numerical size, while the largest labor center in the country, is still quite small in proportion to the number of workers in the society. In 1987, 40.76% of the labor force of 15.58 million workers—9.06 million—were employed as wage/salary workers. “Of the wage/salary earners, 2.1 million or 23% were organized into unions, of which only 346 thousand worked under a collective bargaining agreement” (EILER, 1988: 2).

Nonetheless, KMU’s location in strategic parts of the economy and its alliances with other social movements give it a power considerably beyond its numerical size.

[In 1993, the KMU suffered splits on two different dimensions within the National Capital Region, which covers Metro Manila. While substantially weakened in this region, the rest of the national organization remained intact and was able to act, along with remaining organizations in the National Capital Region, both in regard to local and national political issues (see Scipes, 1996: 227-245). These splits, however, do not detract from the argument herein.]

<sup>7</sup> For details on how the largest union of the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines—a competing labor center established by the Marcos Dictatorship, and supported with millions of dollars through the AFL-CIO’s regional organization, Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI)—challenged a KMU-affiliated local union for control over the workers at Atlas Mines in Cebu during the mid- to late 1980s, which included integral collaboration with a death squad (no exaggeration), see Scipes, 1996: 116-125; a less detailed report is in Scipes, 2010a: 52-55.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of how the organizational features could be beneficially utilized in North America, see Scipes, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with George Aguilon, April 12, 1988 in Davao City. NAMAHEMIN is a geographical alliance covering Davao City, and Davao del Sur and North Cotabato provinces, all on the big southern island of Mindanao.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Lucena Flores and Beda Villanueva, president and general secretary, respectively, of the United Workers of the Philippines, June 21, 1989 in Manila. Villanueva was also the president of the Greenfields Workers' Union. [For an account of the interview, of which these quotations were only a part, see Scipes, 1996: 84-87.] The leadership of the ULGWP had unilaterally and illegally disaffiliated from the KMU, without the permission of the National Executive Council. The majority of local unions then left the ULGWP, re-united into the United Workers of the Philippines, and re-affiliated with the KMU in early 1989.

<sup>11</sup> For an interview with Cleofe Zapanta, secretary general of KMK, see Scipes, 1990. [For a discussion of KMK, see Scipes, 1996: 75-84; Lois West (1997) also has considerable material on KMK.]

<sup>12</sup> This approach built off the work of the great Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire (1984).

<sup>13</sup> Interview in Manila in January 1986 with a person who requested that I not use his name.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the late Erasto "Nonoy" Librado, April 30, 1990 in Davao City.

<sup>15</sup> For more complete details on the development of the KMU, see Scipes, 1996. Another feature not included in this selection, but an important part of the book, are the chapters on women leaders and workers, both in their own women workers' organization, and within local unions and a national federation.

<sup>16</sup> This section is taken from various sections of Scipes, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> By September 1987, a published booklet "listed 118 different vigilante groups throughout the country," referring to Dela Cruz, Jordan and Emmanuel, eds. 1987 (Scipes, 1996: 59), and were first developed in Davao City. Extensive accounting of the violence directed against KMU and its members is provided throughout my book (Scipes, 1996). Note that, "... almost every trade union leader I met had received a death threat by name from at least one of the vigilante organizations (i.e., death squads) by 1988" (Scipes, 1996: xvi).

<sup>18</sup> To get more information, the KMU's web site (in English and Tagalog) is at [www.kilusangmayouno.org](http://www.kilusangmayouno.org), and their organizational address is KMU, 63 Narra St, Barangay Claro, Project 3, 1102 Quezon City, Philippines.

While I am impressed by the KMU, and think there is a lot to learn from their experiences, they are not perfect. I critically addressed a number of issues—including KMU's ideology, the position of women within KMU, bureaucracy within KMU, and KMU's national coalition work—as well as briefly discussed KMU's international solidarity work in a chapter titled "Overview of the KMU" (Scipes, 1996: 183-201). Further, I critically report and analyze the splits in the KMU, as well as subsequent developments (as of April 1994) in Scipes, 1996: 219-247.

Much of the material on ideology, women and bureaucracy had been earlier published in Scipes, 1992a: 147-158.

<sup>19</sup> May 1, 2014 will be the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the KMU.