



Assassinated Filipino labor leader remembered

by Zoltan Grossman

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The radio news report came as a shock to me last Thursday morning. The leader of the Philippine leftist political party, Rolando Olalia, had been found dead. His hands had been tied behind his back, and his body mutilated. Followers of Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile were suspected in the assassination.

I knew Rolando Olalia. The last time I saw him was in May of last year, when I was on a three-month visit to the Philippines. He hosted a feast of roast pig, pineapple and San Miguel beer for foreign unionists and journalists in Manila. They had been attending the conference of his trade union confederation Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), or May First Movement -- founded by his father six years ago.

I remember Lando as an especially warm yet shy person. His image was inconsistent with that of a fiery labor leader. Almost awkward in front of crowds, he nevertheless was respected as an heir to the Philippine tradition of uncompromising labor activism. The movement was based in the grassroots, not in any leader's personality. Nevertheless, Olalia's death may galvanize Filipino workers in the same way that the death of Benigno Aquino stirred the middle class three years ago.

Lando was a mainstream lawyer until his father, Bert Olalia, urged him to take up the workers' cause. When his father died in 1984, Lando succeeded him as the head of KMU. The rank-and-file coalition grew rapidly to challenge the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos, as well as Filipino and foreign industrialists. The number of strikes grew in the face of declining wages. Many were broken by soldiers and hired goons. Others succeeded in the face of overwhelming odds. KMU now represents over 800,000 workers.

Olalia was also secretary-general of Partido ng Bayan, or People's Party.

Filipino workers are among the lowest paid in Asia. Even those who work for the huge U.S. military bases make the average equivalent of 60 cents an hour. The women who work in the sweatshops of Export Processing Zones -- where overseas firms are exempted from most regulations -- make half that amount. Olalia saw hope in the government of President Corazon Aquino -- and her Labor Minister Augusto Sanchez -- despite the fact that Enrile and Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos have been accused of human rights violations. Olalia was keenly aware that Aquino's "democratic revolution" could only survive by being extended to the three-quarters of Filipinos who live in poverty. This, in turn, could only be done under peaceful conditions.

This is where Lando rubbed some Filipino leaders the wrong way. Partido ng Bayan united workers with students, peasants, women's groups, tribal peoples, artists and professionals for the first time. Recently, Olalia promised to call a general strike should the military make a move against Aquino's policy of peace talks with the underground National Democratic Front. The policy has been threatened by figures like Enrile who want a more "efficient" strategy to step up the war.

Lando was not killed for any unique ideas or charisma. He was killed as a symbol. He was killed as a warning to others -- most of all to Aquino herself. If she gives in under the intense pressure, she will become a figurehead president. If she doesn't, she may become a former president.

The United States publicly sides with Aquino. In the Philippines it is perceived as opposing Enrile's bid for power, but not his policies. Continuing to send military aid strengthens his leverage. Indeed, the day before Olalia's death, the State Department denied a visa to KMU leader Crispin Beltran, who had been due to visit Chicago-area unionists, forcing the KMU to send its Manila coordinator in his place. Beltran's house was raided and ransacked. One leader is red-baited; another is eliminated.

So-called "reformist" colonels have reportedly drawn up a "hit list" of government ministers, grassroots activists and ex-political prisoners they accuse of communist leanings. Presumably Lando was on this list. In the unique military parlance, he was thus "salvaged." He joins at least 65 other Filipinos who, according to a Catholic human rights group's figures, have been "salvaged" since Marcos's downfall. Like the Vietnamese village of years past, the death squad destroyed Olalia to "save" him. Will the Armed Forces of the Philippines similarly destroy democracy to "save" democracy?

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