

Taking Stock of 'People's Power'

The Philippines

Over a year after the demise of Marcos, the political situation in the Philippines remains in flux. Yet even before Cory Aquino had completed her first year as president, two events gave a sharp warning of the government's ultimate orientation. The first was the January 22nd massacre of 18 peasants and the injury of dozens of others, when government troops opened fire on 10,000 people marching in Manila, to demand action on the promised land reform. The second event was the related suspension of the peace talks between the government and the National Democratic Front (NDF). Since the writing of this article two events have further clarified developments: Reagan reportedly authorized a CIA operation against the revolutionary movement, while Aquino openly declared her government's intention to wage war on them.

In February 1986, Cory Aquino was swept into office by the long-repressed mass movement for democracy, with a last minute push from part of the military command that belatedly realized Marcos had become a hopeless case. With its slogan of «people's power» and initial moves at democratization, the new government enjoyed immense popularity. However, from the start, the revolutionary forces pointed out that more than formal political reform was needed to change the semicolonial, semifeudal structures bequeathed by the Marcos dictatorship and subordination to US imperialism. These structures and the dictatorship's repressive apparatus would continue to function against the masses, with or without governmental approval, if not decisively dealt with.

Over the past year «people's power» has been kept alive and advanced by the ongoing mass movement, benefitting from the democratization process. The government, however, has failed to take meaningful steps towards the fundamental socioeconomic reforms needed to make «people's power» more than a demagogic, populist slogan. Little more than promises have been forthcoming to alleviate the desperate situation of the majority of the people.

LAND REFORM'S CENTRALITY

Sixty per cent of Filipinos are poor peasants, while most land and other resources are owned by a few big landlords and compradors. Thus, it was not by chance that events crystallized around the march for land reform, for this issue is a key to social justice. Agrarian reform is also related to the

issue of regaining the Philippines' national sovereignty, for maintenance of the semicolonial, semifeudal structures is dictated by imperialist domination, especially that of the US which views the country as a supplier of cheap agricultural products.

Despite this urgency, it was not until the first days of March 1987, that Aquino announced steps for funding land reform, at the same time declining a question as to whether she would distribute land on her own sugar plantation. In fact, the main economic measure adopted by the government in the midst of its seeming indecision, is import liberalization. By lifting the ban on imported consumer goods, the government has given a green light for more imperialist penetration to the detriment of local industry and agricultural development.

The rural population is also the main target of the counterinsurgency campaign conducted by the army, which was actually stepped up in the spring of 1986, concentrated against areas where the New People's Army (NPA) is active. This counterinsurgency includes shelling, kidnapping, torture and murder, hamletting, confiscation and burning of crops, food blockades and the declaration of «free-fire zones» on the rationale of separating the NPA guerrillas from their mass base.

Workers and the urban poor were also part of the march for land reform on January 22nd, for these sectors also feel the lack of meaningful economic changes. The anti-labor laws enacted during the Marcos era have not been repealed. The right to strike has not been restored in reality, despite promises to that effect, and wages remain-

ed fixed at a low level. There are still instances of workers being fired for their efforts to form a union. In a statement released January 18, 1987, KMU (the May 1st workers' organization) pointed out the extent of violence being enacted against workers: «As we continue to wallow in misery, our ranks are openly attacked. In the past year alone, under this new government, 22 strikers were killed in the picket line, 12 were abducted and 'salvaged' (summarily executed), including Ka Lando Olalia and Leonor Alay-ay (labor leader and his driver, believed murdered by the army). In addition, seven were reported missing, 223 injured and 145 arrested in assaults on the picket lines. The ouster of Labor Minister Sanches is the latest attack on our ranks. President Aquino did not heed our plea to retain this pro-labor minister. Instead, she heeded the demands of the representatives of big business and the militarists in the government...»

A statement by PISTON (Federation of Drivers' and Operators' Associations Nationwide) sheds light on the connection between the government's economic policy and the masses' plight: «We, the drivers, belong to the 59% of the population who live below the poverty line, due to the very small income derived from driving... Some \$3 billion, or 30% of the national budget is at present allocated to the payment of interest on foreign debt, a large portion of which went into the pockets of the greedy dictator and his cohorts. What kind of administration is this that gives more priority to the payment of foreign debt than to the millions of its people who are unemployed, without secure