

Reactionary Electoral Circus in the Philippines

No Illusions in Bourgeois Liberals— For Workers Revolution!

The circus is back in town. Mired in the deepest recession since World War II following one of the world's longest and harshest Covid lockdowns, the Philippines is set to hold its national elections on May 9. The elections are a rematch between opposition leader Vice President Leni Robredo and her old rival Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., heir and namesake of the dictator whose 20-year reign rivals the greed, brutality and corruption of the former Pahlavi and Somoza dynasties of Iran and Nicaragua.

Marcos Jr., who Robredo beat in a tight race in 2016, has made no secret of his appetite to return his family to power. Both Robredo and Liberal Party running mate Senator Kiko Pangilinan took part in the protest movement that led to the downfall of the Marcos family.

Largely sidelined during six years of draconian rule by President Rodrigo Duterte and his allies, Robredo is casting for president in what local media portrays as a battle of “Good versus Evil,” the so-called last chance to “save Philippine democracy” from the “return of the Marcoses and a continuation of a Duterte leadership.” We say: *No vote to Robredo, Marcos and all bourgeois parties! Robredo, Marcos at lahat ng burges na partido—Huwag iboto!*

As the spectre of a Marcos comeback looms and with just days to go, Robredo has brought together Stalinists, social democrats, movie stars, liberal intellectuals and capitalist bosses in a popular front reminiscent of the movement that toppled the Marcos dictatorship. Support for Robredo has gained momentum, as the anti-Marcos factions pour money into campaign sorties which attract hundreds of thousands of pink-clad supporters, known as Kakampinks, in cities across the archipelago.

The ideological glue binding the Robredo popular front together is fight-the-right bourgeois lesser-evilism. After the Liberals' massive defeat in the 2019 elections, Robredo drew the lesson that the party needed to run a “people's campaign,” i.e., to ride to power on the backs of the oppressed. Now she is presenting herself against Duterte and Marcos as the “people's champion” who will defend democracy, fight corruption and promote equality.

Marcos on the other hand is running on a platform for “national unity and resurgence.” The campaign has struck a chord with younger sections of the population, many of them workers who have known little else than grinding poverty, neglect and repression since 1986, when the Marcoses and cronies were sent packing to the U.S. by an alliance of disgruntled military officers, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the Makati Business Club and pro-American opposition parties.

Disillusion with a train of “democratic” governments which carried out harsh austerity programs and sold the economy to the imperialists has swung tens of thousands among the urban poor, lower rungs of the urban petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry to Marcos' promise of stable jobs, cheap energy, food price subsidies, public infrastructure projects and an independent foreign policy. Marcos Jr., who looks back to his father's martial law New Society as the “golden age,” has made the imperialists jittery with talk of economic protectionism and a China-friendly stance.

Marcos Jr., who successfully got Davao City mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio, the incumbent president's daughter, to give up her own presidential ambitions and become his running mate, has the backing of right-wing powerbroker Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. No stranger to staging coups and stealing elections, Arroyo aided Marcos Jr. in pulling together a motley crew of right-wing bourgeois parties, regional political clans, fundamentalist Christian churches, and even the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), the country's largest labor body.

Robredo Is a Fraud! Down With the Popular Front!

Having borne the brunt of repression under Duterte, the reformist left Makabayan (Patriotic) Coalition are today the loyal drumbeaters for the Liberal Party-led coalition ticket of Vice President Leni Robredo and Senator Kiko Pangilinan. Associated with the political ideas of exiled Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) founder Jose Maria Sison, Makabayan has repeatedly stressed that Robredo is the most likely candidate to defeat presidential frontrunner Marcos.

On May Day, the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), the labor federation affiliated with Makabayan, discarded red flags for the pink banners of the Liberal Party-led opposition and reiterated their promise “to fully support and campaign for the victory of Robredo and Pangilinan.” At the launch of its “broad united front against the danger of the Marcos-Duterte tandem,” the Sisonite Makabayan justified their support for the bourgeois opposition claiming common aspects between Robredo’s electoral promises and their own platform.

Such politics is nothing new for Makabayan and its satellite groups. The Philippine left has repeatedly betrayed the interests of the proletariat by sucking up to the bourgeoisie. In 2016, Makabayan leaders joined the cabinet of President Duterte, a reactionary politician linked to death squad murders when he was Davao City mayor. The Sisonites continued to maintain their alliance despite widespread street protests involving their own supporters after Duterte allowed a state burial for the late autocrat Ferdinand Marcos Sr. These class traitors would have clung to their cabinet portfolios had the Duterte gang not thrown them out and then launched a murderous campaign against the Sisonites and other leftists.

Today it is to Leni Robredo that the reformist left has attached themselves. Robredo’s Kakampink movement is a popular front because the leaders of the trade unions, the Communist Party and the left have mobilized to support this bourgeois candidate. Opposed to workers revolution, its program aims to replace the Duterte government with a capitalist government administered by the supposedly “progressive” Liberal Party.

The five years of Duterte’s presidency have been disastrous for the working class and the oppressed. On top of the super-exploitation of the proletariat, the horrendous poverty of the laboring masses, the agrarian question and the oppression of women, the Duterte government launched murderous state repression in the name of the “war against drugs” and military offensives against the Moro separatists and the leftist New People’s Army. The massive capitalist offensive during the pandemic, including brutal, devastating lockdowns, has hugely increased the pressure on working people and the oppressed. But the idea that electing Robredo would address any of these problems is a total fraud.

Robredo isn’t an alternative to Duterte; she is Duterte’s vice president and *part of* the Duterte “axis of evil.” The Liberal Party, with its base of landowning oligarchs and industrialists, its ties to the imperialists and the support of the Church hierarchy, represents exactly the same class interests as the Duterte and Marcos clans. Just like Duterte, Liberal president Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III before him presided over the brutal exploitation of the working class and poor peasantry, manifold oppression throughout society, hundreds of state-orchestrated killings, tens of thousands displaced by military operations against the CPP, and countless other outrages against the proletariat and the oppressed.

Parliamentary democracy in this impoverished U.S. neocolony is terribly brittle. But while the bourgeoisie remains divided and threatens to tear itself apart, its competing wings are agreed on one thing—the need to repress the workers and the poor.

Last November, Robredo met with senior military officials and pledged support for the counterinsurgency program while state forces were hounding and murdering Makabayan leaders and peasant militants. To signal her anti-Communist intent, Robredo has excluded Makabayan from her handpicked Senate slate, repeatedly sidelining their candidates during elec-

toral rallies. Despite all sorts of political abuse heaped by Robredo’s Kakampinks, Makabayan leaders slavishly wave pink banners and chant, “*Maki-Leni Huwag Matakot!*” (Be for Leni! Have No Fear!) in sorties alongside capitalist bosses, socialite influencers and middle-class professionals. Against this, we say: *Down with the popular front! Break with the bourgeois Liberals!*

Popular Frontists in Leftist Disguise

While the Sisonite Makabayan and the social-democratic Akbayan Party and Partido Manggagawa shamelessly tail Robredo, left groups around Laban ng Masa (Struggle of the Masses) have launched their “independent labor” ticket. After failing to cobble together an electoral bloc with Robredo, this lash-up of ex-Stalinists, labor unions and NGOs is fielding Leody de Guzman, a labor leader associated with Sonny Melencio’s Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM/Masses Power Party) and the academic Walden Bello, an anti-China nationalist and darling of bourgeois liberals.

Presented as the “pro-worker” and “democratic socialist” alternative in the elections, De Guzman and Bello are anything but. The PLM/Laban ng Masa tandem does not seek to mobilize the working people against their capitalist masters. It does not even try.

The working class of the world has just been hammered by their capitalist rulers in the name of fighting Covid-19. This attack has been even more savage in a country like the Philippines. Opposition to lockdowns and the whole blitzkrieg on the working class is a decisive question. In our statement of 19 April 2021, the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist) said:

“The bourgeoisies’ lockdowns are a *reactionary* public health measure. Workers must oppose them! Lockdowns may well temporarily slow the spread of infections, but they *weaken* the fighting ability of the working class. By shutting down whole branches of industry and services, they have caused an economic crisis and thrown masses of people into unemployment. Closures of schools and childcare facilities have increased the oppressive burden of the family. State repression has been severely increased as democratic and working-class rights have been gutted. Gatherings, protests, travel, strikes, union organizing: all have been restricted or banned. Lockdowns aim to prevent working-class struggle, the only way workers can genuinely protect their health and combat the social causes of the crisis.”

Counterposed to the pro-capitalist leaders of both trade unions and parties of the Philippine left, we declare: *Down with the lockdowns! Ibagsak ang mga lockdown!* What is posed for the working class in the pandemic is to mobilize in revolutionary class struggle to fight for their needs, which requires taking on the capitalists and their decaying system.

But what the PLM/Laban ng Masa did was to support the lockdowns, making them responsible for the horrendous consequences for the working class. There is no mention of lockdowns in their *Democratic Socialist Electoral Platform* (February 2022) or the previous 25-point Laban ng Masa *Declaration and Platform for the 2022 Elections* (March 2021). The latter’s only reference to the pandemic is a call to “Disband the useless Inter-Agency Taskforce on Covid 19.” This is consistent with Bello’s description of the “incompetence and stupidity” of Duterte’s draconian measures. Similar to appeals by the social democrats, Makabayan and labor bureaucrats, this is a call for a more efficient bourgeois response. Melencio’s PLM initially called for a “pro-people lockdown” and went on to distribute food to make the lockdown more “pro-people.” In October, De Guzman expressed concern over the easing of lockdowns (*Inquirer*, 20 October 2021).

There is not the slightest basis for considering critical support for any of these lackeys of the venal Philippine capitalist rulers. De Guzman and his ticket have been busy promoting a platform of tax, labor and electoral reform which they offer to the bourgeoisie as the reasonable alternative to the populist

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platform of Marcos Jr. It comes as no surprise that De Guzman and Bello chose to make their first public appearance before the Chamber of Commerce of the Philippine Islands, the business group that dates back to Spanish colonial rule, in order to court support for the PLM/Laban ng Masa's nationalist industrialization policy. In an exclusive television interview with the Philippine broadcasters association-sponsored Pilipinas Forum carried live on May 3, De Guzman emphatically assured viewers that he and Bello are "not anti-capitalist" and called for partnership and cooperation between the capitalist bosses and the working class.

While occasionally sniping at Robredo's policy declarations, the PLM/Laban ng Masa ticket refrains from opposing the capitalist lady boss Robredo. Organizationally independent of Robredo's camp, the role of PLM and its allies in Laban ng Masa is to cover the left flank of the anti-Marcos/anti-Duterte popular front and hoodwink the workers and poor.

PLM and Laban ng Masa supporters plead that De Guzman is not stealing votes from Vice President Robredo but "contributes to the overall struggle" of "uniting against the Marcos-Duterte axis of evil." By chipping away at Marcos' voting base, De Guzman and Bello's goal is to help Robredo and the bourgeois liberals win.

PLM/Laban ng Masa are acting as appendages of the Liberal Party. Their entire campaign is aimed at pressuring Robredo to the left, which means they are helping to fool the workers about her "progressive" character. Their formal, organizational independence actually makes them more effective as a left cover for Robredo, a side entrance into the popular front for those reluctant to directly support the Liberal Party.

Defend China!

What also binds PLM/Laban ng Masa and the Sisonites of Makabayan to Leni Robredo is their shared anti-China position concerning the Spratly Islands. Consisting of rocks and atolls, many of which are underwater at high tide, the Spratly archipelago straddles the South China Sea shipping lane that connects East Asia to the Indian subcontinent and the Near East. Half of the world's merchant tonnage passes along this route, including 80 percent of China's crude oil imports. The islands are claimed by four capitalist countries as well as the Vietnamese and Chinese deformed workers states. Almost every one of these countries has carried out construction in the Spratlys.

It is no surprise that the U.S. imperialists and their allies are backing Leni Robredo as their choice for the presidency. They are concerned about having a reliable overseer for their interests. The Philippines offers the U.S. a strategic position from which to threaten the sea lanes that are the oil supply routes for China as well as a jumping-off point for military intervention to quell social unrest in neighboring semicolonial countries.

While Makabayan has lined up with Washington and the domestic bourgeoisie to oppose China's efforts to develop sufficient forces in these islands to keep the shipping lanes open and prevent hostile forces from approaching its coast, we say: *Defend China! U.S. Navy out of the South China Sea! U.S. military out of the Philippines! Down with the U.S.-Philippines military alliance!*

Sisonite organizations have organized noisy rallies in the Makati central business district, seeking to outdo the rival social-democratic Akbayan Party (their electoral bloc partners behind Robredo) as the most rabid of anti-China nationalists, while conveniently ignoring the passage of U.S., British and Australian warships in Philippine territorial waters. Not to be outdone, PLM/Laban ng Masa have similarly denounced Beijing and advocate an "independent" regional military-diplomatic bloc against "the expansionist and sphere-of-influence claims of China." Against these proposals to further strengthen the imperialist-dominated Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc, we say: *Down with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)! For a Socialist Federation of Southeast Asia, organized on a voluntary basis!*

Makabayan politicians have criticized President Duterte from the right, accusing his government of being a puppet of Beijing, even egging on the military officer corps to assert territorial claims in the "West Philippine Sea." Makabayan's refusal to militarily defend China along with its cheerleading for the "democratic" counterrevolutionary protests in Hong Kong represent a capitulation to "democratic" imperialism and the Philippines' own anti-Communist bourgeois rulers.

Indeed, the Philippines is key to the U.S. drive, primarily against the Chinese deformed workers state. The proletariat must give unconditional military defense against imperialism to the deformed workers states, including Vietnam, Laos, North Korea and Cuba. In the "Declaration of Principles and Some Elements of Program" (*Spartacist* [English-language edition] No. 54, Spring 1998) adopted at the Third International Conference of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist), we assert:

"Our position flows from the proletarian class character of these states, embodied in the collectivized property relations—nationalized property, planned economy, monopoly of foreign trade and banking, etc.—established by social revolutions that destroyed capitalism. Despite the bureaucratic deformations of these states, our defense of them against the class enemy is unconditional, i.e., it does not depend on the prior overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracies, nor does it depend upon the circumstances and immediate causes of the conflict."

At the same time, we raise the banner of proletarian political revolutions to oust the Stalinist bureaucracies and establish regimes based on workers democracy and revolutionary internationalist policies.

Opposition to imperialist domination and the anti-China war drive—which determines the political life of the Philippines—requires class struggle against popular-front unity with the bourgeoisie and a fight for international revolution. The outcome of a victorious workers revolution in the Philippines will have a huge impact in China and the other deformed workers states and also in Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea, where a militant young proletariat has emerged as a powerful factor.

For Women's Liberation!

In the Philippines, working women suffer horribly under a triple burden of oppression: as women, as members of the working class, and as people in a semicolony chiefly oppressed by U.S. imperialism. Laban ng Masa's statement on decriminalizing abortion is a big factor in De Guzman and Bello's popularity among leftist youth and women. This statement appeals to the deeply felt needs of women in order to promote illusions that Robredo can be convinced to play a progressive role for women's rights. Robredo herself opposes legalizing abortion and is supported by the Catholic hierarchy, who tout her as the "most adherent to Catholic values" of the presidential

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candidates. Moreover, all capitalist regimes in the Philippines base themselves on the Church and the family and are terribly oppressive to women—the presidencies of Corazon C. Aquino and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo speak volumes about this.

By prettifying Robredo's positions and by tying the struggle for women's liberation to exactly the same class that is responsible for and maintains women's oppression, PLM/Laban ng Masa is obstructing the struggle for women's liberation. Abortion—a cheap, simple and safe medical procedure—is in fact a powerful example of this.

Advances for women won't come from an alliance with the Liberal Kakampinks but from class struggle against all wings of the bourgeoisie. The liberation of women requires a workers and peasants government. This perspective is counterposed to the Menshevik/Stalinist dogma of “two-stage revolution” put forward by the CPP of Jose Maria Sison and Sonny Melencio's PLM, swindlers for the popular front, the Church and the forces of reaction.

It is necessary to fight for free abortion on demand and free, quality health care for all. Marxists call for strict separation of church and state and oppose every manifestation of discrimination against women, homosexuals and ethnic, national and religious minorities. Religious backwardness—whether Catholic or Muslim—serves to bolster the family, the key institution for the oppression of women.

To even begin to lay the material basis for the emancipation of women from domestic slavery and all-sided oppression, the system of capitalist exploitation must be swept away through workers revolution, leading to the creation of an international planned, collectivized economy. The International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist) seeks to build an internationalist revolutionary vanguard party to act as a tribune of the people, mobilizing the proletariat in defense of all the oppressed against the common class enemy. Particularly in countries of belated capitalist development, the fight for the emancipation of women is a key component of this perspective. *For women's liberation through socialist revolution! Para sa paglaya ng kababaihan sa pamamagitan ng sosyalistang himagsikan!*

For a Leninist-Trotskyist Party!

PLM/Laban ng Masa appeals to the workers, women, youth and oppressed indigenous minorities to vote “green, socialist, and progressive” on May 9. By putting forward the LEAD (labor-ecologist-and-democratic) slate which includes bourgeois Greens and Liberals, these pseudo-leftists are playing a cruel joke on the working class, literally mis-LEAD-ing them into the captive embrace of its class enemy, the capitalists.

As the capitalist rulers of a semicolonial country in the epoch of imperialism, all wings of the Philippine bourgeoisie are reactionary. The country's national emancipation and social progress require breaking the stranglehold of U.S. imperialism and making deep inroads into capitalist property relations.

Confronted by a fully developed, militant working class and closely tied to the U.S. imperialists both economically and militarily, the domestic bourgeoisie is incapable of advancing either of these struggles and instead condemns the country to poverty and backwardness. It clings to the imperialists to maintain its rule, deploying state and extralegal terror to protect its power and interests and using the Church and the family to inculcate obedience and pacify the masses.

Leody de Guzman and Walden Bello of PLM/Laban ng Masa propose the slogan *Manggagawa Naman* (The Workers This Time). These fake leftists argue that by electing “pro-worker leaders” to executive office, the capitalist state can be administered in the interests of the working class and the oppressed. This is hogwash!

The capitalist state is not a neutral agency that can be pressured to act in the interest of the masses. Consisting at its core

of the cops, courts, prisons and the army—armed bodies of men—the capitalist state is the instrument of bourgeois rule. It exists to impose and defend the “rights” of the capitalists to squeeze profits from the exploitation of the working class. The capitalist state is an instrument of repression against the working class and the oppressed and must be swept away.

Revolutionary communist intervention in elections aims to show the working class that the burning national and democratic questions cannot be resolved without workers revolution in the Philippines. In order to do this requires a revolutionary Leninist-Trotskyist vanguard party that stops at nothing to rouse and mobilize the workers and oppressed to fight for state power. Such a party would present itself as a Communist Opposition and revolutionary pole, exposing the popular front, and particularly its most left-talking proponents, for prostrating the working class in front of the bourgeoisie and putting forward false solutions that can only end in bloody disaster for the oppressed masses.

The Philippine left has repeatedly exhibited shameless subordination to the bourgeoisie—from the “People Power” movements and a string of botched coups against Arroyo to the year-long coalition cabinet including Makabayan and the reactionary Duterte party and its present electoral bloc with Vice President Leni Robredo's Kakampinks.

Such opportunist twists and turns are consistent with the whole history of Philippine Stalinism and help explain why the left there consists of an alphabet soup of outfits which are barely distinguishable politically—all agreeing on the Menshevik/Stalinist “two-stage revolution” model. Each new betrayal tends to result in a cliquist split in which one faction or another is denounced for relying too much on the “national bourgeoisie” and not understanding the “leading role of the working class in the democratic revolution” or for focusing too much on “guerrillaism” instead of electoral politics.

In warning against illusions in Cory Aquino in 1986, we wrote: “Many a Third World nationalist regime has sought to protect its left flank by bringing the Communists into a ‘democratic (or anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, etc.) coalition government,’ only to set them up for a massacre on the morrow” (“Philippines Workers Must Fight for Power!” *Workers Vanguard* No. 415, 7 November 1986).

What is needed is a programmatic break with all variants of the Menshevik/Stalinist dogma of “two-stage revolution,” which subordinates the working class to one or another wing of the bourgeoisie in the fight for “democratic” capitalism while putting off the struggle for socialism to a future that never comes. From the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27, which was drowned in blood by Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Guomindang, to the slaughter of Indonesian Communists by Suharto's military and Muslim fundamentalist gangs in 1965, history has repeatedly demonstrated that “two-stage revolution” means bloody defeat for the working class and oppressed.

For the seizure of state power, an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry under proletarian hegemony is essential. The history of the Philippines and other semicolonial countries has illustrated that the national bourgeoisie can do nothing to end the peasants' plight. It is only through an alliance of all the toilers, led by the working class, that the peasantry can break out of centuries-old oppression.

The fight for proletarian power in the Philippines must be linked to a perspective of international proletarian revolution, particularly in the imperialist centers of the U.S., Japan, Australia and West Europe. The millions-strong diaspora of Filipino workers around the world provides a living bridge between the class struggle in the archipelago and those in the Near East, North America and elsewhere. The key to victory lies in the forging of a Leninist-Trotskyist party, Philippine section of a reformed Fourth International! ■