

# The Labor Union Movement in the Iligan Bay Area: Processes and Outcomes

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## Abstract

*The changing character of labor unionism in the Iligan Bay area may be culled from a diachrony of the major events occurring over a period of more than four decades from the establishment of the first union in the area up to the early 1990s. This article offers a reconstruction of the labor union formation processes and description of the significant outcomes at various epochs.*


*From their formative stage in the 1960s, the labor unions were subjected to grave state repression in the 1970s. Mostly as members of federations, they were engaged in mass actions in the 1980s. They were compelled to rethink their strategies in light of changing industrial and labor policies in the early 1990s.*

*In all, one sees how the labor union movement in the Iligan Bay area had been fractious in nature.*

## An Overview

It has been some four decades ago since the first of the five-unit hydroelectric power generating plant of the Maria Cristina Falls was set up in a community lying along the Iligan Bay in Northern Mindanao, triggering the process of industrialization and generating a societal transformation unprecedented

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in the history of the Iligan Bay, of the City of Iligan from which the bay derived its name, of the municipalities neighboring that city. Too, it has been over four decades ago since the establishment of the first manufacturing plant and the first workers' union in the Iligan Bay area. Yet, no study takes account of the industrial activity and processes of socio-economic transformation, nor of the formation of workers' unions in the area.

This article is a study of the changing character of labor unionism in the Iligan Bay area. In order to achieve its purpose, it reconstructs the history of the labor union formation processes, unfolding the development of events thereof over time, reflected in certain significant outcomes at various epochs. The diachrony centers on major events that have occurred in the history of labor unionism over four decades from 1953 to 1993, with particular emphasis on critical turning points, periodized across workers' unions.

The workers in twelve (12) manufacturing firms whose plants are situated in communities lining the coast of the Iligan Bay were studied for their organizational activities. The manufacturing firms are: the National Steel Corporation (NSC), Maria Cristina Chemical Industries, Inc. (MCCI), Mabuhay Vinyl Corporation (MVC), San Miguel Corporation-Iligan Coconut Oil Mill (SMC-ICOM), Granexport Manufacturing Company, Inc. (GRANEX), Filipinas-Eslon Manufacturing Company (FIL-ESLON), Mindanao Portland Cement Corporation (MPCC), Iligan Cement Corporation (ICC), PILMICO Foods Corporation (PFC), Refractories Corporation of the Philippines, Inc. (RCP), Alsons Cement Corporation [formerly Floro Cement Corporation] and Mindanao Steel Corporation (MINSTEEL).

In nine (9) of the 12 firms, the workers had been unionized. These unions are: the National Steel Labor Union (NASLU); the Maria Cristina Employees Union (MCEU); the Mabuhay Vinyl Employees Union (MVEU); the Mindanao Portland Cement Employees Association (MPCEA); the Iligan Cement Employees Union (ICEU); the Pilmico Employees Association (PEA); the Refractories Corporation of the Philippines Employees Union (RCPEU); the Nagkahiusang Mamumu-o sa Floro (NAMAFLOR); and the Mindanao Steel Free Workers Organization (MINFREWO).

The first seven (7) of these unions are located in firms set up in coastal communities belonging to the political division of Iligan City. The last two (2) are unions organized in firms established in coastal communities belonging to the political division of the municipality of Luga-it in the province of Misamis Oriental which shares the northeastern boundary with Iligan City.



There are no unions functioning in three of twelve manufacturing firms whose workers' organizational activities had been studied: Filipinas-Eslon (FIL-ESLON), San Miguel Corporation-Iligan Coconut Oil Mill (SMC-ICOM), Granexport Manufacturing Corporation (GRANEX). In the first of these three firms, union organizing had started in 1979, surviving until 1987, the latter year being the year in which the firm's management had, for the second time, declared closure of the plant due to financial problems. In that year, the firm's management retrenched the union's officers and many of the union's members, spelling the demise of that union.

In the case of the workers at SMC-ICOM, sometime in 1978, a certification election had been won by a certain federation. The day after the election had been won, the management declared that the company was losing, closing the plant to all. The union never took off the ground since then. In the third firm, two attempts to organize the workers there had failed, allegedly due to union busting.

### **Related Literature: A Brief Review**

As intimated earlier, no study has taken account of the processes of labor union formation in the Iligan Bay area. There are selected studies focusing on labor unions in different parts of the Philippines. Ramos [1976] Wurfel [1965] and Yu [1987] describe the labor movement based on the activities undertaken by the labor unions.

Ramos' study is largely a country study of trade unionism in the Philippines with emphasis on the post-1950 period up to 1971. His analysis centers on the patterns of evolution of the labor movement and its shift in character given the country's levels of economic, political and social development. In general, he claims that changes in the social, economic and political conditions of the country, combined with effects of foreign intervention and ideology, largely shape the development of the character of the labor movement.

The same assertion is presented in the studies of Wurfel and Yu. The former proves the non-existence of political unionism in contemporary Philippine politics, explaining that no such events occurred that gave "..... priority to gaining political power and second place immediate economic goals." [Wurfel 1959: 12] On the other hand, Yu believes that labor militancy and radicalism became resurgent in the mid-seventies as a result of the widespread poverty and political repression. Previously fragmented, economistic and company-oriented, the unions, according to her, shifted to being militant and radical.



Abbas [1988] argues that labor political militancy was already resurgent even as early as in 1969. He believes that the direction and character of the labor movement determine the workers' orientation and the actual determinant of labor movement's character is the policy of government. Thus, "if labor policy was perceived to be repressive, trade unions assumed a political character. If on the other hand, it was perceived to be benevolent, the unions tend to confine purely to economic activities." [ Abbas 1988: 162-165 ]

These works present a macro-level analysis of labor unionism in the Philippines and offer a multi-disciplinary explanation about it.

There are studies which provide empirical data and analysis at the micro-level. These are largely perception studies about workers and unions.

Casambre [1973] and Gorospe [1961] both focus on the politicalization of the workers. Casambre's thrust is to determine whether politicalization is dependent on certain occupation and background factors while Gorospe's primary emphasis is the content of the workers' politicalization.

One recent study on workers' organizations is by Dejillas [1994]. He tries to discuss trade union behavior from 1946 to 1990. Looking at the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) and the Federation of Free Workers (FFW), he examined the internal characteristics and dynamics of trade unions. Among his important findings is that loyalties and alignments within the trade-union movement have a history of shifting continuously — fragmentation, followed by realignments, coalitions and segmentations. He declares that the difficulty to sustain unity among diverse organizations has been brought about by internal and external factors.

Also of relative recency, the study of Aquino [1990] stresses that class forces and class relations are important just as are such factors as kinship, community, paternalism, ethnicity and other social relations. These factors, each a distinct category from the other, are interrelated. With the use of the case study method, she demonstrates the interactive relationship between structure and agency. She shows the plurality of social relations and interests which generally characterize workers' social organisation in the Third World, especially in the Philippines.

In a comprehensive study of the development of industry and commerce, growth of wage employment and the formation of trade unions in the Philippines, Ofrenco [1992] discusses the history of capitalism and the two principal actors in the accumulation process, namely labor and capital. In detailed fashion, the author describes the role of foreign capital, the weak position of the national elite and the nature of State policy vis-a-vis the trade union movement. That Philippine



capitalism is tied up to foreign capital is frankly articulated. He also asserts that State policies had been oscillating between repression and toleration, and these had impinged on national development.

Limqucco, McFarlane and Odhnoff [1989] attempt to discuss two aspects dominating the political economy of development of ASEAN, namely, the growth of an industrial workforce, its outlook and its condition and the emergence of a relatively independent industrial capitalism. Their findings demonstrate that in the organised manufacturing sector, the labour process has become more sophisticated and working conditions have improved. The study focuses on the basic fact about the contribution of labour, capital and technology in accelerating productivity. The authors' treatment of economic history accompanies their economic analysis.

This present article grounds itself on the concrete experiences of workers who continue to struggle in coming to terms with unequal structures brought about by factors that are uncarthed as one goes through a diachrony of the developments in workers' organizations.

## Labor Unionism in the Iligan Bay Area

### *The Decade of Initial Organizing*

The first union in the manufacturing zone of the Iligan Bay was set up in 1955 by the workers in the steel plant then called the Iligan Steel Mills, Inc. Opting to be independent, the union, naming itself NISMEA (National Steel Mills Employees Association), waged a strike four years hence on the issue of working hours. Then, the union had forged relations with some local politicians, in fact, soliciting donations from them to support their activities over the three-month duration of the strike. That union lasted until 1962.

The second union organized was that of the workers at the PILMICO Foods Corporation, a plant which started operation in 1962, then called Pillsbury Mindanao Flour Milling Co., Inc. The union there, the PILMICO Employees Association (PEA), was organized within barely a year since the start of plant operation. The PEA likewise chose to be independent.

In 1964, the union in the steel plant, which went under a new management, set up the Iligan Integrated Steel Union (IISU). Again, it chose to be independent. Many observers believed it to be pro-management, more than anything. [It remained independent until 1972, when all unions were outlawed following the declaration of Martial Law.]

It was only after more than a decade since the first union in the Iligan Bay was organized that a breakthrough occurred, namely, in the success of the Philippine Labor Unity Movement (PLUM) in 1966 to affiliate to it the Mindanao Portland Cement Employees Association (MPCEA), the union of workers at the Mindanao Portland Cement Corporation (MPCC). The plant of the MPCC itself had started operating only in 1962. PLUM as a federation was to wait for three years more before attracting any other affiliate to its fold. Meanwhile, the MPCEA, discontented with the ensuing conditions of its affiliation [observers state that the federation was one that did not really espouse the interest of the workers] detached from PLUM soon after, that is, six months right after its affiliation.

At about the same time, a union was being organized secretly among the workers of the Mabuhay Vinyl Corporation, a polyvinyl chloride plant. This union, formalizing itself in 1967, was not recognized by the company's management. It remained in such a state until the year 1969 when, as the Mabuhay Employees Union (MVEU), it was compelled to affiliate with PLUM, in disregard of the experience of MPCEA. Doing so was the only way that it would be able to negotiate with management, which would not recognize the union unless affiliated with PLUM. Two decades later, this was to change.

Elsewhere, sometime after affiliating with PLUM, the MPCEA waged a successful 7-day strike for recognition of the union. Later in the year, it waged a 19-day strike for the regularization of some 30 casuals. This one was also a successful strike.

The decade of the '60s [including part of the '50s] saw the initial union organizing efforts in the area and the preference of unions to be independent from any federation. Where one union had attempted to affiliate promptly, the experience was unsatisfactory, compelling the union to disaffiliate within half a year since. One of the two unions which remained independent in the decade was claimed by observers to be pro-management. The other was observed to have been influenced heavily by management, whose top officials were alleged to have been the very persons initiating the move to organize the workers, conditional on non-affiliation. Another crucial development of the '60s was the compulsion of a union organized early in the decade to affiliate with PLUM if only to gain recognition by company management. One is led to surmise about the implications of management confidence in the very same federation that an older union, the MPCEA, had perceived to be disinterested in espousing the workers' cause.

A serious labor problem occurring before Martial Law pertained to the dispute over working hours, provoking the 3-month strike of NISMEA members.



This strike caused huge company losses. The other labor activities involved MPCEA-management conflicts which were resolved to the advantage of the workers.

### *The Decade of Grand Unionizing*

The decade of the '70s was eventful, despite [ or because of? ] the outlawing of the unions which had been existing upon declaration of Martial Law. But even previous to such declaration, some events in union organizing had occurred. For one, a breakthrough was made by another federation, the Southern Philippines Federation of Labor (SPFL), having succeeded in affiliating to it the MPCEA. However, because of irreconcilable differences with the SPFL legal counsel then, the affiliation lasted for only six months, as it did with PLUM.

At another firm, the Iligan Cement Corporation (ICC), the workers established in 1971 their union, the Iligan Cement Employees Union (ICEU). ICC's plant was constructed in 1965, and started operating in 1967. The ICEU affiliated soon enough with the SPFL. This, perhaps, was the more real breakthrough for SPFL, as that union remained with SPFL since.

A third success of PLUM was made in the case of the union at the MCCI which was organized in 1971. Situated quite near to MVC, a sister company of MCCI, the workers of the former chose the path taken by the workers at its sister company. This was also shortlived, lasting for only three years. [ And what PLUM lost was to be the gain of still another federation, the Federation of Free Workers, whose success with MVC in 1974 was its first ever. ]

Meanwhile, an intra-union dispute arising from the 1971 election row occasioned a 12-day shutdown at the National Steel Corporation, the issue being the presidency. At the end of the twelfth day, the newly elected president assumed office.

These unions were, of course, paralyzed with the declaration of Martial Law. In 1974, the outlawed unions were revived. In the case of the workers at the National Steel Corporation, it renamed its union the National Steel Employees and Workers Association, NASEWA. Another union was organized in that year. The workers at the Mindanao Steel Corporation, whose plant was established in 1970, organized the Mindanao Steel Free Workers Organization (MINFREWO). Its affiliation with the Associated Labor Unions (ALU) was the shortest affiliation yet, lasting for only one month, on account of the disenchantment of the union with the manner that the federation was handling union matters, starting with the

collection of dues, and others. The hiatus over four of martial law years was broken with the revival of the MINFREWO in 1978, this time, affiliating with the National Federation of Labor (NFL), a first in the area. The ensuing period tested the determination of the union members, particularly that MINSTEEL was one of those placed under military control until 1985, in negotiating fearlessly for workers' privileges. The union had remained unfazed despite various forms of outright intimidation by representatives of management, including the display of firearms during CBA negotiations.

In 1974, too, the FFW made a significant leap, succeeding at the certification election at the MCEU, its first success ever in the Iligan Bay area. As intimated earlier, this success was garnered at the expense of PLUM.

It is surprising to note that, in spite of its reputation with three earlier unions, and despite the nearness of one union, the MPCEA, to the plant site of the former Floro Cement Corporation, PLUM had been able to entice the union at this yet other cement firm to affiliate with it. This happened in 1978, four years after PLUM's failure with the MCCI workers. It is recalled that a neighboring union, the PEA, also located at the northeastern section of the Iligan Bay coastal area, had remained independent and still another neighbor, the ICEU, had affiliated with SPFL. The only remaining PLUM affiliate was the MVEU, which was situated far away from ICEU, towards the opposite section of the Iligan Bay coastal area. One is led to believe that in the case of the union at the former Floro Cement Corporation, neither physical proximity to an earlier union, nor foreknowledge about a federation's unsavory reputation with earlier affiliates mattered in the choice of federation. But no, there is something beyond the surface that explains the affiliation with PLUM. This was to be elaborated in the events unfolding in the next decade.

Quite significant in the year 1978 was an occurrence at the SMC-Iligan Coconut Oil Mill, Inc. Union organizing there scored a success. But illtimed as it was, such success was shortlived. The management declared on the day after the certification election that the company was losing, prohibiting entry to the plant site since then, reopening the plant only within a year later. It recalled its workers, but not the union leaders. The election had been won by FFW which was vying with ALU. This would have seconded the FFW's success made with MCEU, a good four years earlier.

Something else that mattered happened in the year 1978, as intimated above. The MINSTEEL workers reorganized, and, using the same name MINFREWO, affiliated with the National Federation of Labor (NFL), also a first for that federa-



tion in the Iligan Bay area. Thus was finalized MINFREWO's falling out with PLUM.

The year 1979 was highlighted by three major happenings. The certification election at the PEA confirmed its independent status. A second attempt to organize a union at the SMC-ICOM failed, reportedly because some of the organizers were bought off by management. The year was marked by the start of union organizing at FIL-ESLON. It was to be the third success of FFW in the area as the union there affiliated with it in 1980. Unfortunately, it happened to be the same year in which the management declared that the company was losing. The plant of FIL-ESLON slowed down production, resulting in the reduction of employees. The retrenchment trend continued to the early '80s, until the second closure of the plant in 1987, which effectively wrote *finis* to union organizing there.

The '70s may be portrayed as the decade of excitement with which the five or so federations vied with each other in the area. PLUM, ALU, NFL, FFW and SPFL aimed as their targets the very same young unions, at times; at other times, they aimed at different unions. The successes of PLUM were shortlived, with its members seeking affiliation elsewhere after experiencing some disappointing times with the federation. The only affiliates lasting with it as of this decade were MVEU and the union at the former Floro Cement Corporation. As for FFW, two of its three gains so far had been with unions that failed to survive, in the face of company production losses, compelling reduction in labor force, even plant closure. The only one substantially existing by the end of the decade was MCEU which was formerly with PLUM. As for SPFL, having had a falling out with its first affiliate from the area, it had one affiliate lasting with it at the end of the decade. In the case of the NFL, it too, had one, the same one that had detached from ALU. A number of unions retained their independence.

### *The Decade of Militant Unionism*

The early years of the decade had built up on the restiveness of the workers which had found the decade of the '70s quite repressive. This agitation found expression in various forms during the decade. They had found affinity with other organized groups — the religious, teachers, students, drivers, farmers, urban poor, professionals — all up against the dictatorship. Some significant developments may be highlighted here.

The workers in the youngest of the firms, Refractories Corporation of the



Philippines, formed a union which affiliated with the SPFL in 1980, the second success of that federation. As to the lone PLUM affiliate, reportedly, the union had garnered some gains in 1980, better than in the past, through the CBA negotiated with management. In this year, certain unions celebrated Labor Day with a parade which advocated the advancement of national issues on top of local union matters. However, the celebrating unions did so separately from those which federation affiliations were dissimilar from theirs.

This decade had been a decade of aggressiveness in the expansion moves of the FFW. It attempted to win the CE in ICEU, failed there; seeing how the size of the membership of NASEWA would increase the power of the FFW, its organizers frequented the plant of the NSC; it won the CE of NASEWA in 1984. And such feat catapulted its reputation all over the bay. That, perhaps, was the crowning glory of FFW in the island of Mindanao.

Meanwhile, protest actions were being hotly undertaken, mostly SPFL-led, particularly anti-Marcos rallies. Others, not SPFL-led, like the dispute at PILMICO Foods for five months, captured the interest and sympathy of the general public. But even when they were SPFL-led protest actions, these had also advocated issues of general concern. In fact, the representatives of MCEU, MVEU and the union at FIL-ESLON, unions that were not SPFL-affiliated, had participated in the SPFL-initiated and coordinated workers' strike in 1985. This was participated in by other sectors which found common cause with the workers, and which had their own sectoral issues to pursue, too, e.g., the religious, professionals, teachers, among others.

It was during this decade that the kidnapping occurred of Comm. Domingo of MINSTEEL and three others by suspected rebels, causing a lot of panic and tension; unions leaders were investigated; security measures were tightened. The victims were reportedly released without ransom.

In the same decade, the union in the former Floro Cement Corporation, being articulate and vocal about the cause of the workers, was suspected to be infiltrated by the National Democratic Front. This suspicion is surprising, considering that PLUM, the federation to which it was affiliated had, in the past decades, been identified as the federation favored by the management of certain companies. This talk about infiltration stemmed from what transpired in 1980. In that year, the FFW had won the certification election. But the union so affiliated was unable to function due to non-recognition by management. Some of the workers loyal to PLUM formed another group, NAAMO, which the management was happy to deal with, instead of the one affiliated with FFW. The CBA



arrived at by NAAMO with management was referred to by many unionists as *patrik* ["fake"] because it was allegedly a management product.

Sometime in 1984, another formation called Nagkahiusang Mamumuo sa Floro (NAMAFLOR) was initiated by some 300 workers who were disillusioned with NAAMO. NAMAFLOR waged an unusual activity which the unionists termed Individual Declaration of Strike (IDS). This was made possible with the assistance of SPFL organizers. In response, management closed the plant, declaring a serious malfunction of the kiln. The plant closure had effectively ended the life of the union. When the plant reopened in 1988, 121 of the 300 striking unionists were recalled. The rest who were not recalled filed a suit against management. Settlements were offered, which certain of the strikers accepted. Such case demonstrated the efficacy of union busting, a practice which was prevalent also elsewhere in the Philippines.

The spate of demonstrations, rallies, etc., were articulations of the less than violent reactions to the dictatorship then, to the series of retrenchments, to the economic crises, to the whole helpless situation. No amount of labor-management council institutionalizing would deter the workers from engaging in these activities, or even minimize the number of disputes.

The situation had ripened to a state cultivating the outright expression of anger over the neglect of the workers' welfare and transgression of their rights.

In 1986, except for one or two firms, the workers from all the manufacturing firms participated in an indignant march-rally denouncing the brutal killing of national labor leader, Lando Olalia and his trusted driver.

Within the year, a 'minority' union was organized at the MCCI, which affiliated with SPFL. As told, the members thereof enjoyed almost all the privileges that the 'majority' union enjoyed, except union leaves. And the members of the former could take up issues with management only through the majority union.

The flurry of activities following the assumption of a new government in 1986 was reflective of the expanded atmosphere of freedom of expression. This did not mean that the situation about which the workers were raising hard questions had improved. For the activities held over the latter period of the year 1986 until 1989, the list is long: participation in the *Welga ng Bayan*, transport strike supported by MVEU, ICEU, RCPEU, among others; a 45-day strike waged at MCCI due to CBA deadlock. Elsewhere, plans to wage strikes due to CBA deadlock in two firms, MVC and FIL-ESLON, did not push through. The issue had been settled before the strike would materialize, in the case of MVC. In the case of the FIL-ESLON workers, management ordered the closure of the plant,

effectively causing the death of the union there. All union members were re-trenched and awarded separation pay.

In 1987, the first attempt was made by FFW to organize the workers at GRANEX, a coconut oil milling company which was set up more than a decade back, in 1975. This attempt failed. Also, in 1987, a supervisory union was being organized at the MCCI.

In 1988, another attempt was made to organize a union in GRANEX, this time by SPFL. Still, no success was achieved in that area.

In 1989, a walkout of the workers occurred at the NSC for unfair labor practice. A shutdown ensued, at the cost of approximately PhP 2 million.

In the same year, 1989, the supervisory union of MCCI affiliated with FFW. In that year, FFW won in the election at MVEU. Thus did MVEU successfully wean itself away from PLUM with which it was affiliated for two decades.

A Welgang Bayan in 1989 attracted the participation of a number of unions, including the RCPEU, ICEU and MINFREWO.

By all counts, the decade of the '80s was the most colorful, most trouble-ridden and most challenging to labor. It displayed the determination of the FFW to get to its fold the biggest union and maintain good relations with those already in it. It reflected the militance of the SPFL-affiliated unions and their concern for workers' economic welfare, as well as, political issues of national concern.

No success at unionizing had been reached at GRANEX. The other coconut oil milling company had obliterated union efforts there through plant closure.

Already, the signs of the presence of the underground in several of the unions had become more obvious, although not admitted.

### *The Decade of Rethinking*

Following the excitement of the '80s were the depressing retrenchments of the '90s, attendant to the power crisis which impelled some firms to close or temporarily shut down, spelling the demise of some unions. Still, there were union activities that kept the fires burning, like strikes waged in certain firms, filing of cases of Unfair Labor Practice against the management of another firm, namely MCCI. At the only time ever that the MVEU waged a strike [ cause: CBA deadlock ], the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) issued a return-to-work order while the MVC management conceded a few of the workers' demands.

All unions participated in the unified celebration of Labor Day, for the first



time ever, in 1991, a feat achieved through the facilitation of the officers of the union of City Hall employees. Even then, one sees the willingness of most of the workers in private corporations to link with unionized government employees.

Still, despite the termination of martial law, the military made its presence felt during the certification election of certain unions.

After these union activities, there had been no known occurrences pertinent to workers' benefits that were confrontational in nature.

The prospect of retrenchment in light of import liberalization has hung over the head of the worker. While some organizations which advocate the welfare of the workers had exerted effort to strengthen worker's education and organizing, none, so far, had tackled the matter of strategizing relations with management within the framework of contractualization of labor. In light of the changing industrial and labor policies, the labor unions are compelled to rethink their political strategies.

### Summary

From their formative stage in the 1960's, the unions had been subjected to grave state repression in the 1970s, were engaged in mass actions in the 1980s, mostly as members of federations, and in the early 1990s, were compelled to rethink their political strategies in light of changing industrial and labor policies.

The decade of the '60s was one of organizing unions for workers in those firms that had been established earlier. There was one union which declared itself independent. Certain others changed affiliations as much as four times in the life of the union. Many workers' unions, particularly those in firms established in the later decades, affiliated with the Southern Philippines Federation of Labor. Then, Martial Law outlawed all workers' associations, a fate suffered by other organized groups. This age of repression coincided with the era of militant unionism.

In the '80s, the unions became restive regardless of affiliation — whether they were tackling issues internal to the firms and unions or participating in activities of the larger labor sector, collectively addressing issues of national concern. The Federation of Free Workers gained many affiliates during the decade, the most significant being the NASEWA, renamed NASLU, the union of workers at the National Steel Corporation, the biggest plant in the Iligan Bay area. The early part of the '90s marked an inclination of unions to engage in concerted action, as in the affair initiated by the union of government workers, namely, the celebration of Labor Day. The affair was joined in by all federations and independent unions, for the first time ever. On the surface, this is quite impressive, as it impacted on

all involved in union organizing. The matter of what occasions in the future will merit concerted action of the unions is interesting to study.

In those firms which export most of their produce, there had been very little ground for cultivating union organizing. Especially for two coconut oil processing firms which had attributed the plant shutdowns to fluctuations in world prices of products, no union had been effectively organized despite attempts of certain federations.

The solidarity forged among some unions and various sectors such as the religious, professionals, drivers, students, urban poor, had facilitated the undertaking of local political actions in some instances. Meanwhile, management of certain firms had developed ways to quell unionism in the area.

There had been various constraints placed on the workers' right to freedom of association. Combined with the diversities of the unions and the disunity among them, these had not augured well for the labor union movement. In all, one can see how, over the past four decades, the labor union movement in the Iligan Bay area had been fractious in nature. Organizing still being on the plant level, it had not yet been able to respond effectively to the changing policies related to labor contractualization, import liberalization, etc. There are indications emerging, though, which illustrate how unions, regardless of affiliation, are able to act collectively. How these can be translated to be more substantial and meaningful for workers, as a whole, need to be studied.

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