

Pablo Manlapit's Fight for Justice

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In 1991 Filipinos in Hawaii will commemorate their 85th immigration anniversary to this State and recall their contributions to its economy from the sugar cane and pineapple plantations to today's tourist hotels. One aspect of the Filipino experience in Hawaii that needs remembering also is their long history of fighting for justice. Primary sources show that Filipino workers prior to the Second World War demanded improvements in their working conditions, but we know very little of their activities and of those who were blacklisted, arrested, jailed and deported to the Philippines.

This is an essay to honor Pablo Manlapit who was one of the early fighters for justice. Many people do not know of him. Some know him as the "leader" and "president" of an organization that demanded higher wages and changes in the working conditions of plantation laborers. Labor historians describe him as a labor leader who led a "haphazard" strike in 1924.¹ Survivors of that strike present another view; they remember him as a remarkable man who had the courage to express what many workers wanted.² A former Filipino councilman recalls that his parents used to call him "Pablo" after the "firebrand" labor leader.³ In general, though, many young people of Filipino ancestry do not know who Manlapit was.

Early Years and Migration to Hawaii

Pablo Manlapit was born on 17 January 1891 in Lipa City, Batangas, a province in southern Luzon, Philippines. He was five years old when the Spaniards executed Jose Rizal, the Philippine national hero, and eight years old when the Philippine-American War began in February 1899. He completed his elementary and intermediate education in Lipa City's public schools. He apparently moved to Manila soon after finishing his intermediate education and worked as a messenger for the Manila Railroad Company. He later transferred successively to the Bureaus of Civil Service and of Forestry where, presumably, he performed clerical or other office work less physically taxing than being a messenger. He then joined an electricity construction project on Corregidor as a timekeeper. Manlapit would recall later that it was a United States project and that he was soon dismissed for his labor union activities.⁴

Manlapit left Manila on 10 January 1910 and arrived in Honolulu the following month. This was his third attempt to leave for Hawaii. His earlier attempts had been foiled by his parents who on both occasions literally pulled

him off the Hawaii bound ship.⁵ Upon arrival in Honolulu, the HSPA (Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association) sent him to Kukaiau sugar plantation on the island of Hawaii (Big Island) where he worked for about two years. He was later dismissed for getting involved in a strike there.⁶ He then moved to Hilo where he made a living as a salesman and proprietor of a pool hall. On or about 6 June 1912 he and Anne Kasby, from Paauilo, Big Island, were married. Her mother was German and her father a white American homesteader. In February 1915 the couple moved to Honolulu.⁷

Reinecke has provided us with detailed information, taken from *Polk's Directory*, showing how Manlapit supported his family in Honolulu. He edited *Ang Sandata* in 1916 while working as a stevedore.⁸ In 1918 and 1919 he worked as an interpreter and janitor for attorney William J. Sheldon who had an office at 12 Merchant Street in downtown Honolulu. Sheldon apparently acted as Manlapit's mentor, encouraged him to study on his own and probably allowed him to read the law books at the office. On 19 December 1919 Manlapit was granted a license to practice law in the district courts. He was in his own words, "the First Filipino lawyer to practice law in Hawaii."⁹

Manlapit, however, seems to have spent more time in labor organizing than in practicing law, particularly getting involved in the big strikes of 1920 and 1924. Details of those strikes have been told elsewhere.¹⁰ Here we shall mention the general outlines of the strikes and describe Manlapit's role.

From 1906 to 1920 the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association brought to Hawaii 33,273 Filipinos, who were mostly single adult males, on three year contracts as plantation workers. The majority came from the Visayas region and "had been carefully screened by the HSPA to weed out those with schooling and thought least adaptable to manual field labor."¹¹ The HSPA also brought Filipinos because they were wary of the Japanese majority on the plantations; in June 1919 Japanese constituted 54.7% (24,791), while Filipinos constituted 22.9% (10,354) of all plantation workers.¹²

We have an official report on the working conditions of Filipino plantation workers around this time by Prudencio Remigio who had been appointed "Filipino Commissioner in Hawaii" by the Philippine (colonial) government. In general, Filipinos lived in barracks or huts made of wood and with iron roofs "so low that they permit the sun's heat to be felt severely, especially in the afternoons."¹³ Although salaries varied according to the work performed (day laborers in the fields and mills, contract workers who cut and loaded cane, and group cultivators who tilled the land as tenants), the general complaint was that

a worker could make ends meet only with "great economizing of expenditures."¹⁴

Remigio also tried to understand the "moral and psychological life" of the Filipino workers. He reported that many went to Hawaii with high expectations led on by recruiting agents who talked of better opportunities in foreign lands:

Although their hopes are raised in this manner, when they reach the destination, it turns out from rude experience, that circumstances do not permit their desires and aspirations to improve themselves to be fulfilled, and the supposed opportunities that have impelled them to leave their own country are not found. The situation becomes odious for some, forced for others, and desperate for all.¹⁵

As latecomers to Hawaii, Filipinos occupied the lowest status among the ethnic groups. Moreover, there was a shared racist belief among the planters and other powerful individuals, such as the publisher Wallace Ryder Farrington, that Filipinos rather liked living poorly and miserably, such as having five or six people in one bedroom and a breakfast of a "loaf of bread dissolved in a bucket of water," evoking an image of a contented work horse.¹⁶ Manlapit, who was fluent in Spanish, Tagalog and English, would later express the Filipino workers' complaints, which were also raised collectively during strikes.

The Strikes of 1920 and 1924

Prior to the actual strike in 1920, Manlapit had contacted Filipino groups and Japanese community leaders to promote interethnic cooperation. In August 1919 Manlapit joined Japanese leaders in meetings with Japanese workers to discuss higher wages, the main cause of the Japanese plantation workers' strike in 1908-09. He contacted emerging Filipino leaders, such as Nicolas C. Dizon, Juan Briones Sarmiento, Hugo Ritaga and Pedro M. Esqueras, for support in forming a Filipino association. Thus, the Filipino Labor Union (FLU) was formed during a big meeting at Aala Park in downtown Honolulu on 31 August 1919. Manlapit was elected president and Esqueras, treasurer.

From September through December 1920, conflicts developed between Manlapit and the Japanese leaders (who also disagreed among themselves) on scheduling the planned strike. Manlapit had been eager to schedule a strike, while some factions of the Japanese recommended sending petitions to the HSPA which both groups eventually did without positive results. Still hoping for joint efforts with the Japanese, Manlapit cancelled the strike date twice until Filipino workers in Kahuku struck on 18 January 1920, which forced Manlapit to "lead"

the strike. The Japanese eventually joined the strike because HSPA officials had left them no choice; the HSPA had ordered evictions of Japanese workers from the plantation housing.

By March the HSPA had broken the strike by hiring Hawaiian, Portuguese, Chinese and, later, new Filipino recruits from the Ilocos region as strikebreakers. Leadership conflicts within the Japanese and Filipino camps only strengthened the HSPA. Soon the strikers drifted back to the plantations. The HSPA, apparently believing that the Japanese leaders had masterminded the strike, succeeded in having fifteen of them indicted and convicted for conspiracy. No charges were brought against Manlapit and other Filipino leaders. To block future labor activism, the HSPA convinced the Territorial Legislature to pass the criminal syndicalism act which penalized anyone advocating crime, violence, sabotage or other acts of terrorism for political or industrial ends. Finally, a centralized reporting or spying system coordinated from the HSPA Secretary's desk became a standardized practice for the sugar establishment.

Thanks to the HSPA spy network, we are able to document Manlapit's continued labor activities for the Higher Wages Movement from 1922 to 1924.¹⁷ Specifically, 1923 was a busy year for Manlapit. He spoke at workers' meetings on government roads and sites nearby but outside the plantation premises and at Aala Park in downtown Honolulu. A confidential report of a meeting in Waipahu ("in front of the Chinese store near the bank") on 13 January 1922 began with:

The meeting was held about six o'clock P.M. Five men spoke. Antonio Balbuena spoke in Visayan, the plantation boys spoke in Ilocano, Manlapit spoke in Tagalog and in English. A white man, Mr. Sung, spoke in English. This man has been here about one year. Mr. George Wright spoke in English, speaking for the United Workers of Hawaii.¹⁸

The speakers urged the 500 to 600 people who attended to sign a petition to the HSPA asking for higher wages.

From plantation managers' reports, we know that Manlapit had a hectic schedule the following Sunday, 22 January 1923. At 2:30 p.m. he and Wright presided at a meeting on the government road near the Honouliuli ranch at the entrance to the Ewa plantation. About 200 people attended and heard Manlapit talk about working eight hours a day with \$2 as their wage. "He was applauded when he said that he and Wright fought the attempt of planters to bring in 50,000 coolies."¹⁹ In the evening of the same day Manlapit and Wright spoke at a mass meeting held in the Japanese theater in Waialua. About 400 to 500 Filipino

workers from Waialua plantation and other districts attended. Manlapit spoke in English and in "one or more of the Filipino dialects." He, like Wright, pointed out that Ewa plantation had made considerable profits the past ten years and that some of it should be shared with the workers.

Those who heard Manlapit speak at meetings generally recall three things. First, because the plantations had banned him, Manlapit had a box handy so that when he needed to give a speech inside the plantation he would stand on top of the box. Second, he was a charismatic speaker who could deliver long speeches without notes. Third, his message to all Filipino workers was to unite and demand a wage of \$2 per day. Pedro Ponce remembers Manlapit's visit to Kauai:

Pablo Manlapit came here and he gave a talk. Basically, his talk was that we Filipinos have to pull together, be united, and we can raise our salary. We were asking for \$2 a day. Before we asked for that we were being paid ten cents an hour; one hour, ten cents. So Manlapit was going around and talking around the plantations and encouraging people to strike so that they could ask for the \$2 per day.²⁰

Manlapit also tried to obtain the support of Cayetano Ligot, the Philippine Resident Labor Commissioner to Hawaii, who had arrived in Honolulu on 27 April 1923. Manlapit himself had advocated for the creation of this position, but unfortunately Ligot chose to oppose Manlapit and the Higher Wages Movement and instead sought close relations with the HSPA. Manlapit also accused Ligot, who was a former governor of an Ilocos province, of dividing Filipinos: "Mr. Ligot has endeavored to stir up tribal and factional antagonisms. He appeals especially to the Ilocanos, advising them to have nothing to do with the Tagalogs or the Visayans."²¹ The rift between Ligot and Manlapit was publicized in Hawaii and the Philippines. In Hawaii, the establishment gave their support to Ligot, while in Manila outspoken labor leaders supported Manlapit's suggestion that Ligot be recalled.²² In the end Ligot retained his post because Territorial Governor Farrington convinced Governor General Leonard Wood to trust Ligot, not Manlapit.²³

Manlapit justified the demand for higher wages as the Filipino worker's right to live decently since the field workers' minimum wage of a dollar a day was not a living wage. Moreover, he argued that American traditions inspired the Higher Wages Movement: "The keynote of Americanism, for the laborer, is the opportunity to advance—to better his condition. It is one of the cherished American ideals that each generation shall stand in advance of the preceding one, better physically, mentally, spiritually. And America demands for her workers this opportunity for development."²⁴

The Filipino plantation workers' strike of 1924 occurred over a period of approximately five months from April through September. In reality, it consisted of loosely coordinated strike actions on Oahu, Kauai, Maui and the Big Island under the general direction of the Executive Committee of the Higher Wages Movement composed of Pablo Manlapit, George W. Wright, Patricio Belen, Prudencio Gabriel, Emigdio Milanio, Pedro Valderama and Cecilio Basan. Local leaders on each island had an active role in directing strike activities, a topic that awaits detailed research. Many strikers who had been evicted from their plantation housing lived in "strike camps," a general term for all forms of temporary housing that included warehouses, hotels, public parks, sidewalks and beaches. Many people wondered how the strikers sustained themselves and their families for several months. Oral testimonies of the Kauai participants, mentioned earlier, reveal that local leaders maintained peace and order in the camps and organized a solicitation drive for food.²⁵ Also, the strikers themselves pitched in by catching fish in the ocean. In Hilo, outsiders theorized that the strikers had access to some "secret" funds, "or many of the strikers by this time would be dead of starvation, for it is known that many of them have no money and many owe balances in the plantation stores."²⁶

That Manlapit and the central union officers did not control the strike was shown in the strike activities on Kauai which culminated in what is now known as the "Hanapepe Massacre," or "riot" from the establishment's perspective. Four police officers and sixteen strikers were killed during this confrontation in Hanapepe, Kauai. Manlapit was not there when the massacre took place, and it is clear from the testimony of the survivors that the police and temporary security hires panicked and started shooting indiscriminately. The establishment, however, claimed that the strikers provoked the police.²⁷ Furthermore, they blamed Manlapit and other strike leaders on Kauai for inciting the workers. Governor Farrington, for example, concluded that "It is obvious that such an outbreak must have resulted from the Filipinos being misled through inflammatory counsel or speeches of their leaders..."²⁸ This incident led to Manlapit's conviction and imprisonment, to be discussed below.

The *Honolulu Advertiser* focused on Manlapit since its editor assumed, like Governor Farrington and the planters, that Manlapit controlled the territory wide strike. His presence or absence at the Sunday Aala Park meetings and his trips to the neighbor islands were described in detail; detectives followed him everywhere. For example, it reported that Manlapit went to Lihue, Kauai in the morning of 12 September 1924 "with Arthur McDuffie, Honolulu detective, at his heels."²⁹ The newspapers also published the many charges brought against

Manlapit, a form of harassment the HSPA routinely used to punish labor leaders and strikers.

Charges Against Manlapit

The microfilm records at the First Circuit Court and the Hawaii Supreme Court reveal that in June 1917 the City and County Attorney for Honolulu charged Manlapit with "soliciting, inducing, procuring and hiring certain laborers" or Hawaii residents to travel outside Hawaii without a proper license. The court cases' index shows that Manlapit was just one of many accused of inducing laborers to leave Hawaii. The sugar bloc, apparently always worried about the labor supply for the plantations, had managed to have a law passed in 1915 requiring a license to be an "emigrant agent."³⁰ There is no record of conviction of Manlapit on this charge.

The next set of charges against Manlapit occurred in 1920, a strike year. In March, J. Lightfoot, Acting Attorney General of the Territory of Hawaii, petitioned the First Circuit Court to disbar Manlapit.³¹ He used as evidence a report from F.E. Thompson, who had been hired by the HSPA to spy on Manlapit, that accused Manlapit of soliciting a sum of money in exchange for calling off the strike. Manlapit's attorneys appealed to the Hawaii Supreme Court after the Circuit Court judge accepted the petition. The Supreme Court later ruled in favor of Manlapit.³² In April the grand jury of the Territory of Hawaii indicted Manlapit for embezzling \$86.40, money supposedly owned by two individuals mentioned in the case.³³ Five months later, Manlapit's attorneys moved to set a trial date for this case, but apparently no date was set.

No charges were brought against Manlapit from 1921 to 1923, but at least three were filed against him in 1924, all related to the strike that year. The first charged that Manlapit violated the Board of Health's sanitation code because he failed to provide adequate "water closets" at the Kalihi strike camp, a converted warehouse on Middle Street which was leased under Manlapit's name. Manlapit was found guilty and fined \$25.³⁴

The other two cases stemmed from an article published in *Ang Bantay* which claimed that the staff of Waipahu Hospital, operated by the Oahu Sugar Company, forced the removal of a dying baby from the premises on 10 April 1924. The baby died eight days later. The baby's father, Pantaleon Inayuda, had been officially discharged as an employee of the sugar company on April 8. E.W. Greene, manager of the company, and R.J. Mermod, physician in charge,

contradicted the article and reported that, on the contrary, Mermod had advised Inayuda to keep the sick baby in the hospital but Inayuda would not listen to him. On April 22 the Territory of Hawaii charged Manlapit with libel. He was found guilty and fined \$100.³⁵

In mid May, Pablo Manlapit and Cecilio Basan were accused of conspiracy in the first degree for having caused Inayuda to give false testimony in the Inayuda baby incident or, to use the technical term, "subornation of perjury." Inayuda became the star witness for the prosecutors. In mid September, a few days after the Hanapepe massacre, Manlapit and Basan were tried and found guilty, and were later sentenced to imprisonment at hard labor for two to ten years.³⁶

W.B. Pittman, Manlapit's lawyer, may have unwittingly sent him to jail when he argued that Manlapit was fighting a "war" against capital: "In war all tactics are fair tactics...Manlapit saw his people crushed to the earth by the power of the sugar interests. He went to their rescue...The big interests are crying for the blood of Manlapit and Basan."³⁷ Judge Banks rejected Pittman's premise that a strike was a war situation which, therefore, justified all tactics. Submitting a new set of sworn statements which attested that detectives had offered to pay witnesses so Manlapit would be sent to jail, Pittman appealed the case. The Hawaii Supreme Court, however, ruled against the appeal on 29 May 1925 because it had been filed one day too late.³⁸ Manlapit went to Oahu Prison that same day.

Road to Exile

Troubles pursued Manlapit. On 2 September 1925 the Attorney General of the Territory of Hawaii asked the First Circuit Court to disbar Manlapit for "gross misconduct" since he had been convicted and sent to prison approximately two months before. The court disbarred him on 7 January 1926.³⁹

Meanwhile, his family suffered financial and emotional hardships. Anne Manlapit suffered a breakdown, and the four children were sent to the Catholic Orphanage while she recuperated. When the family reunited, they supported themselves by washing and pressing men's pants. This traumatic experience convinced Alice, the eldest Manlapit daughter, that organizing and participating in strikes meant personal suffering.⁴⁰

On 13 November 1925 Manlapit asked for a pardon from Governor Farrington. He recounted his "contention that the evidence upon which I was

convicted was fabricated in important particulars, but, as those who testified against me were almost immediately hurried out of Hawaii and returned to the Philippines, my friends have experienced great trouble in producing the best evidence to sustain that contention."⁴¹ Fortunately, his relatives managed to get an affidavit from Pantaleon Enayuda (or Inayuda) who admitted receiving payment in exchange for his testimony against Manlapit. This admission from the "chief witness against me...shows that I have been correct in continually asserting that the case against me was what is popularly termed a 'frame-up.'"⁴² He admitted that Farrington was his last resort: "I am absolutely penniless and helpless at this time—treated as a felon along with murderers, burglars and others thought to represent the scum of the community."⁴³ He requested Farrington to conduct a new investigation, but his request was ignored.

In March 1927 the prison board paroled Manlapit on condition that he take the next boat to the Philippines. Since placing this type of condition on a parolee had never happened before in Hawaii, Representative Norman K. Lyman of the 5th district introduced a resolution in the Territorial Legislature that called for the removal of the deportation clause and asked the prison board to justify its actions. Between March and August the debate on acceptable parole terms preoccupied the legislators, the prison board, and Manlapit and his family. Finally accepting his friends' advice, Manlapit accepted Governor Farrington's parole, which was granted on condition that Manlapit leave Hawaii.⁴⁴

Manlapit sailed for Los Angeles on 23 August 1927 with these parting words, "I will return."⁴⁵ He criticized the dominant few in Hawaii:

My offense was not against any law of morality or against any political statute, but against a system of industrial exploitation. I was railroaded to prison because I tried to secure justice and a square deal for my oppressed countrymen who are lured to the plantations to work for a dollar a day. I was kept in prison far beyond my minimum sentence because I refused to curry favor or seek concessions from those who held the power. I would not sacrifice my self-respect even for the sake of liberty.

The governor of the Territory, acting under the instructions of the little group of sugar planters who still hate and fear me, ordered me to leave Hawaii as the price of granting me my freedom. I am convinced that the governor will some day realize his mistake.

I hold it to be a shameful thing that Hawaii should bow to the will of a few men in private life who are not responsible to the citizens for what they do.⁴⁶

From 1927 to 1932 Manlapit was in Los Angeles and other areas in California. He was only briefly involved with the Filipino Federation of America

