

# Carl Damaso: A Champion of Hawaii's Working People

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The ongoing celebration of the ninetieth anniversary of Filipino immigration to Hawai'i provides an excellent opportunity for the community to take stock of its contributions and legacy in the islands and to pay tribute to earlier pioneers who made sacrifices to make life better for present day generations. One man who exemplified the courage and gave voice to the hopes and dreams of the early Filipinos in Hawai'i was Calixto "Carl" Damaso. Because most present day Filipinos do not know much about this shy, self-effacing man, it becomes even more important to retell his story so that his generation's legacy is passed on and not forgotten.

## Who is Carl Damaso?

On January 26, 1990 one of the greatest labor leaders in the history of the Filipino American community passed away. Carl Damaso, who gave 51 years of his life serving Hawaii's workers, died at the age of 73. His passing was mourned not only by his family and close friends but by the entire labor movement in Hawai'i. Damaso was one of the last surviving militants and pioneer Filipino labor leaders who took an active part in the "labor wars" of the 1930s and late 1940s when American workers fought for the right to unionize, the eight-hour day, social security, and unemployment compensation.

## A Labor Recruit from Zambales

Born in the town of San Felipe in the province of Zambales in the Philippines, Damaso came to Hawai'i as a teenager in the early 1930s during one of the darkest periods in U.S. history. It was the height of the Great Depression. Thousands of businesses and farms were closing down, and hundreds of thousands of laid-off workers walked the unemployment lines, victims of the collapse of the economy. Barely fourteen years old, Carl Damaso had signed a labor contract in 1931 with an agent of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) and boarded a ship for Hawai'i, following the dreams of thousands of other Filipinos who had earlier gone to the islands to work on the sugar and pineapple plantations.

In 1934 the youthful seventeen year old Damaso had his first confrontation with Hawaii's powerful sugar barons. It was the year the U.S. Congress passed

the Tydings-McDuffie Act, otherwise known as the Philippine Independence Act, in response to lobbying pressure from American sugar interests in the South and the racist American Federation of Labor to curtail the entry of Philippine sugar and immigrant labor into the U.S. That year, young Calixto joined a strike of his fellow Filipino workers at Ola'a Sugar Plantation — later known as Puna Sugar Company — on the island of Hawai'i. Filipino field workers, who made up more than seventy percent of the plantation workforce, were protesting the company's cuts of their already miserably low wages and employment discrimination. The strike was defeated and young Carl Damaso was kicked off the plantation. His name was placed on a "do not hire list" of workers who were tagged as "labor agitators." This was the infamous "blacklist" kept by the HSPA and circulated among employers in the islands. Unable to find work, Damaso was forced to leave the Big Island and moved to the island of Maui.

## Plantation Working Conditions

Before World War II, the sugar planters — also called the "Big Five" — controlled Hawai'i like a fiefdom. They monopolized the economy as well as the islands' political system (Fuchs 1961; Kent 1983). Racism and discrimination on the basis of color and nationality were the facts of life. To keep wages down and workers divided and unorganized, the plantation bosses pitted workers of different nationalities against one another.

Because of the employers' deliberate policy of "divide and rule," the workers' response was to organize along ethnic and racial lines. Japanese and Filipinos, the two largest nationalities on the plantations, formed separate "racial" unions. Whenever one of the unions went on strike, the plantation bosses would use the other ethnic groups as "scabs" by raising their wages and thereby breaking the strike. Work assignment was also based on one's nationality and race with Caucasian and Portuguese workers getting the higher paid skilled and supervisory positions, while Japanese and Filipinos were assigned the back-breaking work in the fields. By the 1930s, Filipinos made up some seventy percent of the entire sugar and pineapple workforce in the territory.

Filipinos who were brought to work to Hawai'i by the HSPA signed a labor contract requiring three years of hard work on one of the plantations. It meant six days of work a week, ten hours of actual work (not including meal breaks) at an average wage of 90 cents a day or about \$20 a month. The lowest paid white worker — the plantation police — earned \$140 a month, Damaso recalled. Filipino immigrant workers who completed the terms of their labor contract would be provided with transportation home by the HSPA.

Plantation workers used to receive a bonus if they worked 23 days a month, but this was eliminated in 1932. At the height of the Depression, the HSPA cut the wages of every worker earning \$60 a month by ten percent. This was one of the reasons why Damaso and the workers at Ola'a Plantation had gone on strike.

But there were no unions on the plantations at that time, and suspected labor leaders were fired, arrested or deported. That was the fate of earlier Filipino labor leaders like Pablo Manlapit, Cecilio Basan and Epifanio Taok — the leaders of the 1924 Filipino strike which resulted in the bloodiest incident in the history of Hawaii's labor movement. On September 9, 1924, sixteen Filipino striking workers and four policemen were killed and many more wounded in a "riot" in Hanapepe, Kaua'i (Ethnic Studies Oral History Project 1979).

Manlapit and sixty of the Kaua'i strikers were convicted of "criminal conspiracy." Manlapit was exiled from Hawai'i to California and was not allowed to return to the territory until 1932. The 1924 strike lasted eight months and cost the HSPA millions of dollars to crush it.

### Carl Damaso — the Pioneer Labor Agitator

One of Damaso's closest friends, Ah Quon McElrath, a retired International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) labor leader — and currently a member of the University of Hawai'i Board of Regents — whose husband, Bob McElrath, was one of the founders of the union in Hawai'i, recalled the years when Carl was "blackballed" by employers. "I remember he would tell me stories about going to plantations to look for work, and managers would pull out the [desk] drawer and see his picture and say, 'Well, I'm sorry, there's no work here for you,'" she said.

On Maui, Damaso was able to find a job with the Wailuku Sugar Company. But shortly after, he was again fired for attempting to start a union. He was able to get a job with the Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Company in Pu'unene, and again found himself in the center of another effort by Filipino workers to organize a union and improve working conditions. Damaso became involved in the effort of Antonio Fagel, one of Manlapit's surviving labor organizers, to form an underground Filipino union (Beechert 1985; Zalburg 1979). To keep the HSPA from suspecting their activities, the union was called *Vibora Luviminda*.

In 1937, Damaso led a strike of more than 1,000 Filipino sugar workers on Maui's three largest plantations. The sugarcane cutters demanded that they be paid ten cents per row of sugarcane instead of the usual seven cents a row. The

strikers were evicted from their plantation housing. They set up camps outside the plantation property and on the beach. They survived by fishing and planted vegetables for food. They also received support and donations from sympathetic Japanese workers and other unions in Honolulu.

The strike lasted for three months, and the workers won a pay raise and recognition of their union. It was a historic victory as it marked the first time in Hawaii's history that a sugar company recognized and bargained with a union.

During the strike, Damaso was introduced to Jack Hall and Bill Bailey, two young, militant Caucasian organizers of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Recognizing the crucial role of the support given by workers of other nationalities and unions, Damaso was convinced that the only way for workers to win against the employers was by building a union that would unite all workers on the plantations and the docks regardless of race or nationality. Under the leadership of Damaso, the Vibora Luviminda was renamed the Maui Plantation and Mill Workers Industrial Union and had a membership of 4,000 Filipino workers.

But Damaso's organizing success did not sit well with Hawaii's plantation bosses. Shortly after the strike was settled, Damaso recounted how he and eight other leaders of the Maui strike were arrested and "charged with various crimes under laws used to break unions." He was given a light sentence but was now considered a "dangerous labor agitator." With his name at the top of the employers' blacklist, Damaso found he could no longer earn a living on Maui.

Damaso was demoralized and moved to the island of Moloka'i where he survived by fishing and playing pool. In 1938, he decided to move to O'ahu. But he could not land a job for he was still blacklisted by employers. When World War II broke out, Damaso found work at the Navy supply depot at Pearl Harbor. The war took many workers into the armed services and there was a labor shortage.

### The Battle to Build the ILWU

After the war, a new era had dawned in Hawai'i. Second generation children of immigrants had enlisted in the military, fought and died in battles in Europe and the Pacific for their adopted country. Taught to defend democracy and to die for freedom, these returning war veterans were determined to continue the battle for democracy in the political and economic arenas of Hawai'i. In the years following the war, ILWU organizers began in earnest to build the union among longshore and sugar workers.

In 1946, Damaso was hired as a longshoreman by Castle and Cooke Terminals, which had been organized by the ILWU in 1945. That year, the ILWU succeeded in organizing sugar workers and, when the HSPA would not meet their demands for higher pay and better working conditions, they went on their historic 79-day strike which closed down all the plantations in the islands. The strike reached a dramatic moment when the HSPA imported more than 6,000 workers from the Philippines — freshly liberated from Japanese occupation — to help break the strike. The planters hoped that the anti-Japanese sentiment among Filipinos resulting from their bitter war experience would help break the strike solidarity forged by the ILWU between Filipino and Japanese workers (*The New Philippines* 1947). The HSPA ploy failed, however, as the newly imported Filipino workers — the “46 Boys” or *sakadas* — instead supported the strike. The ILWU scored a huge victory, marking the most successful strike by Hawaii’s workers against the HSPA up to that time.

Damaso rose through the rank-and-file and established himself as a leader among the longshoremen. In 1949, Hawaii’s longshore workers went out on a 177-day strike. Again the ILWU-led workers won the strike as well as their demand for parity in pay with their counterparts on the West Coast. Hawai‘i longshoremen working the same ships and cargo, doing the same jobs, and working for the same employers as their West Coast union brothers had been paid lower wages. By winning parity, the ILWU helped end the treatment of Hawai‘i workers as “second class” citizens. During the strike, Damaso was in the forefront of solidifying the ranks of the longshoremen, spending long hours talking with Filipino workers, visiting plantation camps to build support for the strike. He served as the Filipino interpreter, working closely with ILWU international president, Harry Bridges, and other union officers.

The longshore victory, along with their earlier organizing success on the plantations, had a far-reaching impact on the influence of the ILWU in Hawai‘i. It established the union as the most influential labor organization in the islands and earned it the grudging respect of employers.

### Damaso and the Progressive Filipinos

Following the ILWU’s 1949 dock strike, Damaso was elected business agent for the longshore workers. He served in that capacity for ten years until he was elected director of the ILWU’s O‘ahu division, the union’s largest, in 1959. In 1964, thirty years after his first successful effort to organize the sugar workers on Ola‘a Plantation on the Big Island, Damaso was elected president of

the ILWU Local 142. He held the highest elected post in the most important labor union in Hawai‘i for seventeen years until his retirement in December 1981. In all, he gave a half-century of his life serving Hawaii’s working people.

An important impact of the ILWU and leaders like Carl Damaso was the decline of narrow nationalism and divisive regionalism within the Hawai‘i Filipino community. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the decline of social organizations in the community that were based on regional or provincial affiliation. The ILWU encouraged the building of community organizations that embraced the various ethnic groups (e.g., Waipahu Community Association) or Filipino community groups that included everyone regardless of regional or provincial origin (e.g., Waiialua Filipino Community Association). It was not uncommon for these community associations to be headed by ILWU members.

Given the success of the ILWU in improving the lot of working people in Hawai‘i, Filipinos developed a close affinity for the union. During this period before statehood, the leadership in the Filipino community had close ties to or held leadership positions in the ILWU (see *Ti Mangyuna* newspaper<sup>1</sup> and *The New Philippines* magazine<sup>2</sup>).

Besides Carl Damaso, among the Filipinos who played leading roles in establishing the ILWU as Hawaii’s most powerful union were Antonio Rania, the first Filipino president of the local, Constantine Samson, Simeon Bagasol, Justo de la Cruz and Eddie Lapa from O‘ahu; Pedro de la Cruz from Lana‘i; T.C. Manipon, Pedro Racela, Basilio Fuertes and Abe Palakay, the former Kaua‘i division head; Regino Colotario from Moloka‘i; and former Big Island division director, Frank Latorre. Along with Damaso, these Filipino labor leaders were influenced by progressive politics. Many of them were sent by the ILWU to attend the famous San Francisco Labor School to learn not only basic trade union organizing skills but to understand the workings of the political and economic system (*The New Philippines* 1947).

These Filipino progressives sponsored speaking tours by trade union leaders from the Philippines such as Amado Hernandez, the well-known poet and writer. They also sponsored concerts by the black American artist Paul Robeson when he visited Hawai‘i. The ILWU was one of the few American labor unions in the 1950s to express sympathy for the Huk rebellion in the Philippines.

During this period, the leading Filipino community newspaper in Hawai‘i was *Ti Mangyuna*, which was published in Ilokano, the language of the majority of Filipino workers in the islands. The paper was not only explicitly pro-labor but anticolonial during a period in American history when it was not popular to

espouse those political beliefs. Its reports on international events highlighted the post-World War II pro-independence struggles of colonized peoples in Asia, Africa and Latin America. *Ti Mangyuna* translated into Ilokano articles by Frank Marshall Davis on the struggles of America's minorities against racism and on the emerging civil rights movement of the 1950s. The editors of *Ti Mangyuna* were Rev. Emilio Yadao, who was the Filipino education assistant in the ILWU's Public Relations Department, and Koji Ariyoshi, the editor of the left-wing newspaper, *Honolulu Record*.

### The McCarthy-Red Scare Era

But the leadership and active involvement of the progressives in the Filipino community soon declined. The 1950s saw the rise of right-wing conservatism in the U.S. fueled by Senator Joe McCarthy's anticommunist witch hunting crusade. With the Cold War tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as a backdrop, McCarthy declared war on all political progressives — from liberals to communists. Hundreds of individuals and organizations that held progressive political ideas and philosophies were publicly persecuted, denied their democratic rights and brought to "kangaroo court trials."

The ILWU nationally and in Hawai'i was not spared. It was one of the main targets of McCarthy's anticommunist campaign. *Ti Mangyuna* carried articles covering court appearances and testimonies of Filipino labor leaders during the Smith Act trials in Hawai'i. Courageously refusing to be intimidated by McCarthy's rabid attacks against its leadership, the ILWU was one of thirteen unions expelled from the AFL-CIO. But the union survived the attempts to split it internally and to weaken it. During the height of the anticommunist attacks, ILWU workers throughout Hawai'i staged a one-day work stoppage in support of international president, Harry Bridges, one of McCarthy's targets for deportation and imprisonment.

The anticommunist hysteria, recalled Damaso, had an impact in the Filipino community. One of the leading progressives, Simeon Bagasol, who was an ILWU organizer, was brought to a deportation trial in 1952 for allegedly breaking immigration laws. His only "crime" was being an immigrant who spoke out against injustice and for holding political views unpopular with the McCarthyists, said Damaso. A similar case was brought against Chris Mensalves and Ernesto Mangaoang, the Filipino leaders of the ILWU Local 137 in Seattle.

As a result of the harassment and intimidation, according to Damaso, many of the Filipino progressives in the labor movement began to withdraw from

active involvement in community affairs. And from the late 1950s until the 1970s, a full generation, the leadership of the Filipino community fell into the hands of individuals who "generally held more politically conservative views," said Damaso.

As a result, social and cultural activities such as terno balls and beauty contests became the main focus of Filipino community activities. Many new and sometimes competing organizations emerged based on township and regional roots. While playing an important role in assisting new Filipino immigrants adjust to life in Hawai'i, the overwhelming majority of the organizations in the Filipino community, in Damaso's view, generally followed the pattern of being involved primarily with the internal — and often parochial — affairs of the community at the cost of neglecting significant political issues facing the broader or mainstream Hawai'i society. Thus, although fairly large in size, the "organized" sector of the Filipino community has more often than not placed itself on the sidelines by not taking a public stance on critical issues facing the people of Hawai'i, thereby depriving Filipino Americans of a much needed "voice" in the state's political battlefields.

### Damaso Leaves a Legacy of Militancy

When Carl Damaso retired from the ILWU at the end of 1981, he had presided over a very difficult but successful transition period for the union. Under Damaso's leadership, the union was confronted with some of the biggest threats to its survival as a labor organization. It saw a sharp decline in employment among sugar and pineapple workers in Hawai'i, a result of mechanization and the closing down of sugar and pineapple plantations that took their operations overseas to countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and Costa Rica where workers are weakly organized and wages are much lower. Mechanization of docks and warehouse operations also drastically reduced the ranks of longshore workers.

From more than 50,000 members in the mid-1950s, the ILWU had shrunk to about 24,000 by the early 1970s. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the union had begun to organize aggressively workers in Hawaii's most important and fastest growing industry -- tourism and resorts. It also organized workers in general trades such as bakers, auto mechanics, tour bus drivers, hospital workers, and many other lines of work. By the late 1970s, the ILWU membership began to grow again.

In recognition of his years of dedicated work serving Hawaii's workers, the State House of Representatives passed a resolution honoring Carl Damaso in

1982. Damaso was extolled as a "caring man of vision whose strong sense of working class values has safely guided his union in times of troubled waters."

Retired ILWU regional director, Thomas Trask, recalls Damaso as "a guy with a lot of fortitude. Never backed down from a fight. He was a very strong individual. Strong, but kind. He was well liked, and people respected him for the fact ... that he always kept his word."

Ah Quon McElrath remembers that Damaso "had a kind of native intelligence where he could size up situations and act on them correctly. He had a true understanding of the needs of workers and their families. He deeply believed in the traditional union movement."

At the 1981 ILWU International Convention, Damaso gave his retirement speech and keynote address to the members whom he had served well for so long:

We must keep on fighting ... That is the history of our union. That's what makes us strong. We must analyze issues, inform our membership, mobilize for battles. This time, the battles will not be on the picket lines alone. They will be in the political arena — in the voting booths, the halls of the legislature writing letters to our congressmen, testifying wherever we need to be.

Indeed, Carl Damaso, a humble, tough and street-wise man, will always be remembered by the workers with whom he stood shoulder to shoulder in their battles for labor's rights. And just like the sugar and pineapple plantations in Hawai'i, the passing of Damaso signified the end of an era.

Carl Damaso was survived by his wife, Charlotte; sons, Alfredo and Carl, Jr.; daughters, Mrs. Gloria Mills and Mrs. Marilyn Galdones; twelve grandchildren; nineteen great-grandchildren; one great-great-grandson; and a host of nieces, nephews and cousins.

### Endnotes

1. *Ti Mangyuna* was first published in 1949 as a monthly. It became a biweekly publication on February 6, 1952 until April 21, 1954. It was published as a weekly on May 9, 1954 until it ceased publication in December 1958.
2. *The New Philippines* was first published in February 1947. It came out irregularly as a monthly magazine, and in 1948 it was published by Labez Publishing Co. until August-September 1948. The editor was Mrs. Esperanza G. Labez, the wife of Ric Labez who was an assistant to Jack Hall of the ILWU.

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