

*By Bobby M. Reyes*

**May 1st is Labor Day in the Philippines. It may be best to remember the Filipino Labor founders, as headed by Isabelo "Don Belong" de los Reyes.**

**Please see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/192316770933155/> on "Reinventing" the Philippine Labor Movement".**

*This article is from the official file of the Philippine Senate [http://www.senate.gov.ph/senators/former\\_senators/isabelo\\_delos\\_reyes.htm](http://www.senate.gov.ph/senators/former_senators/isabelo_delos_reyes.htm)*

*, as annotated by Bobby M. Reyes, a grandson-in-law of Isabelo de los Reyes. The annotation and correction come in italics.*

*This writer was asked by a parent of a Caucasian son-in-law of one of Don Belong's grandchildren to describe the family patriarch. This author said: "Don Belong could be compared to several figures in American history – all rolled into one great statesman. As a writer, he was more-than the Filipino equivalent of Mark Twain for he was also the father of Filipino folklore. He was the Filipino equivalent of Joseph Smith, as he founded also a church. He did not, however, write a Bible; he merely translated it from Spanish to the Ilocano language. He was more-than a Jimmy Hoffa, for he is the father of the Philippine labor movement. He was like Bob Dole, for he was once a member of the Philippine Senate, but he was more-than Mr. Dole, a defeated American presidential candidate, for Don Belong was actually elected Acting President by the remaining generals and leaders of the First Philippine Republic.*

**Senator Isabelo de los Reyes was born in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, on July 7, 1864, to Elias de los Reyes and Leona Florentino.** *His mother, Leona, is considered the first Filipino poet and most probably Don Belong inherited his mother's genes and love for writing.*

He acquired his early education in the seminary of Vigan. The cruel discipline imposed by the friar-professors and their arrogance and bigotry inflamed his rebellious spirit so that he came to have a lifelong *distaste, if not hatred*, for friartocracy (sic).

In 1880, at the age of 16, he went to Manila and enrolled in the College of San Juan de Letran. Two years later, on his eighteenth birthday on July 7, 1882, his father died. After receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Letran, he entered the University of Santo Tomas, where he studied law and paleography. In 1886 he finished the course on notary public, but could not practice it because he was then 22 years old - three years short of the minimum age required by law to qualify as notary public.

To supplement the limited monthly allowance he received from his mother, he became a journalist. Writing was in his blood, for he inherited his passionate love for literature and writing ability from his mother. He wrote articles for *El Diario de Manila*, *La Oceania Espanol*, *El Comercio*, *La Revista Popular*, *La Opinion*, and other Manila newspapers. *Eventually, Don Belong became a publisher and at one time, he owned several printing shops (about nine printing presses, according to some sources)..*

On June 14, 1884, while he was a 20-year-old struggling newspaperman, he married Josefa Sevilla of Malabon.

In 1889 he founded the first vernacular newspaper in the Philippines, *El Ilocano*, with himself as editor as well as publisher. This periodical did not last long. However, it achieved distinction in the history of Philippine journalism. He made intensive researches on Philippine history and culture and wrote various historical works, such as "Las Islas Visayas en la Epoca de la Conquista" (first edition in 1887, second edition in 1889); "La Expedicion de Li-Mahong contra Filipinas en 1574" (1888); "Triuntos del Rosario 0 Los Holandeses en Filipinas" (1888); "Prehistoria de Filipinas" (1889); "El Folklore Filipino" (1889); and "Historia de Ilocos" (1890, 2 vols.).

As a journalist, Don Belong, as he was fondly called, aroused the hostility of the friars and officials because he openly criticized the evils of the Spanish rule and advocated reforms. He particularly denounced the huge haciendas of the religious orders and demanded agrarian reform to ameliorate the miserable condition of the landless Filipino tenants. The Spanish

authorities naturally branded him as a “tilibusterismo” (traitor).

In January 1897, shortly after the execution of the "Thirteen *Bicolano* Martyrs of Bagumbayan," Don Belong was arrested and jailed in the Bilibid Prison. He was one of the many patriots who were jailed and tortured because of their complicity in the ranging revolution, which Andres Bonifacio and his Katipuneros began in the hills of Balintawak in August 1896. While he was agonizing in prison, his sick wife died. The inhumane authorities, who called themselves Christians, would not permit him even a few minutes to attend his wife's funeral and see his orphaned children.

*The truth was that originally, Don Belong was not a member of the Katipunan. However, Andres Bonifacio created a fictitious list of the supposed Katipunan members and supporters. Don Belong was in the list. When the fake list of Katipunan members and supporters “fell” into the hands of the unsuspecting Spaniards, all the individuals listed therein were arrested.*

Inside the Bilibid Prison, Don Belong was able to talk with many inmates, who were Katipuneros, and learned from them the history of the Katipunan and the reasons why they rose in arms against Spain. Accordingly, he wrote within his prison cell the “Sensacional Memoria sobre la Revolucion Filipina,” which became one of the valuable works on the history of the revolution. *Thus, Don Belong actually was converted into a true believer and follower of the Katipunan while he was imprisoned.*

The arrival of General Fernando Primo de Rivera in Manila on April 25, 1897, as successor of the ruthless Governor-General Camilo de Polavieja (who ordered the execution of many Filipino patriots, including Dr. Rizal), saved Don Belong from the firing squad. This new governor-general, comparatively more humane than Mr. Polavieja, deported him to Spain, where he was incarcerated at the infamous Montjuich Castle in Barcelona. When the Pact of Biak-na-Bato was concluded on December 14-15, 1897, he was released. To silence his trenchant pen and win over to the Spanish side, he was given a distinguished job as Consejero del Ministerio de Ultramar (Counselor of the Ministry of Colonies) in Madrid, a position which he held from 1898 to 1901. At that time, the Spanish-American war was raging in the Philippines and in the West Indies.

While working in the Ministry of Colonies, Don Belong fell in love with a charming Madrileña, Senorita Maria Angeles Lopez Montero, daughter of a retired Spanish infantry colonel. He married her in 1898.

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His marriage to a Spanish girl and his having a good job in the Spanish Government did not, however, diminish Don Belong's love for his native land. His patriotism could not be bartered for a beautiful girl and a high government position. In 1899 he published in Madrid "La Sensacional Memoria sobre la Revolucion Filipina," which he had written in the Bilibid Prison. This book stirred great sensation in Spain, for it exposed the evils of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines, such as the native Filipinos, thereby causing the downfall of Spain in Asia. It had a preface written by Don Miguel Morayta, Spanish historian, statesman, professor, and friend of the Filipino people. *In Madrid, Don Belong used his excellent oratorical skills to talk about reforms in the Philippine archipelago and, thus, he turned opportunities into a bully pulpit for the Filipino homeland.*

During the Filipino-American War (1899-1902), he used his pen to lambaste the Yankee attack on the First Philippine Republic. He founded and edited two nationalist periodicals in Madrid, "El Defensor de Filipinas" and "Filipinas Ante Europa." He wrote two books, both published in Madrid, namely, "Independencia y Revolucion" (1900) which urged the Filipinos to carry on their war against America and "La Religion de Katipunan," which discussed the teachings and organization of the K.K.K.

*After President Emilio Aguinaldo was captured by the Americans on March 23, 1901, the remaining generals and civilian leaders of the First Philippine Republic voted to name Don Belong as their new President. Don Belong, however, was still in Spain at that time and the news of his appointment reached him too late. (This was related by Dr. Frank Quismorio, Jr., a charter member of the Philippine History Group of Los Angeles, during a group discussion about the life of Don Belong.)*

On July 1, 1901, the Spanish Government permitted Don Belong to return to the Philippines. He brought many books with him, among which were those written by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Victor Hugo, Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and other socialists of Europe. These books inspired him to introduce socialism into his own country. *Since the Christian part of the Philippine-American War had already ended when Don Belong arrived in Manila, he decided to fight the American colonizers by constructive means.*

Shortly after his arrival in Manila, he contacted the labor elements, urging them to unite and protect themselves from the avaricious capitalists. He explained to them the benefits they would derive by means of collective bargaining. On February 2, 1902, he founded the first labor union in the Philippines, called the Union Obrera Democratica Filipina (Philippine Democratic Labor Union), with himself as president and Hermenegildo Cruz as secretary, Realizing the value of propaganda, he founded and edited the first labor newspaper in the country, La Redencion del Obrero (The Redemption of the laborer), which championed the rights of labor.

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Utilizing his labor leadership, Don Belong, in a meeting of about 42 members of his labor organization at the Centro de Bellas Artes in Quiapo on August 3, 1902, launched the Philippine Independent Church and proclaimed Father Gregorio Aglipay as the Supreme bishop. Shortly after this, he led a general strike of factory laborers and farm tenants against the American business firms and friar-owned haciendas. This general strike was sparked by a strike of the Filipino cigar workers against the Commercial Tobacco factory in Malabon, which was owned by Mr. Moxon, an American businessman. It is said that more than 2,000 laborers and tenants demonstrated in the streets of Manila. Civil Governor William Howard Taft had to call the U.S. Cavalry to disperse them.

As the mastermind of the abortive general strike, Don Belong was arrested and jailed in Malabon. He was convicted by the court on the charge of public disturbance and sentenced to four months in prison. Because of his imprisonment, the mantle of labor leadership passed to the hands of the fiery Dr. Dominador Gomez on September 3, 1902.

After his release from prison, Don Belong left Manila in February 1903, for China and Japan. He was able to contact the self-exiled revolutionary general, Artemio Ricarte, in Yokohama, on the Philippine situation.

He returned to Manila, and later, in 1905 he sailed for Spain, where he worked as a juror (Jurado) of the Spanish Government in Barcelona until 1908. *(Actually, Don Belong was exiled by the Americans and he chose to serve his banishment in Spain.)*

On April 3, 1909, he returned to Manila, with his Spanish wife and children. His wife died on February 10, 1910.

In 1912, at the age of 48, two great events highlighted Don Belong's life - first was his marriage for the third time and second, his election as councilor of the City of Manila. His third wife was Maria Um *(Lim was the actual surname)*, a pretty 18-year old Chinese mestiza of Tondo. By winning a seat in the city council, he began his political career. Impelled by his nationalist sentiment and hatred for the friars, he passed through the city council several resolutions changing the names of certain streets bearing the names of the friars to those of the Filipino patriots. Owing to his popularity among the masses, he was re-elected for another term and served as city councilor until 1919.

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After his senatorial term ended, Don Belong gave up politics and devoted the last years of his life to religion and writing.

In the senatorial elections of 1922 he launched his candidacy in the First Senatorial District (comprising the Ilocos provinces). His opponent was Representative Elpidio Quirino, a rising Ilocano politician. He won after a hard campaign. On May 27, 1923, while serving his term in the Senate (1922-1928), his third wife died of childbirth. *Actually, Don Belong was forced to return to his native region to run for the Senate, as he felt that the vested interests in Manila (now called the Imperial Manila) would fight all out his senatorial aspiration.*

Upon the expiration of his senatorial term, Don Belong gave up politics and devoted the last years of his life to religion and writing. As an honorary Bishop of the Aglipayan Church, he wrote many sermons and other religious tracts. It should be noted that he was the author of most of the Aglipayan literature, such as the Biblia Filipina (Philippine Bible), Oficio Divino (Mass-Book), Catequesis (Catechism), Plegarias (Prayers), Genesis Cientifico y Moderno (Scientific and Modern Genesis), and Calendario Aglipayano (Aglipayan Calendar). He also translated into Ilocano the Gospels of St. John, St. Luke, St. Mark, and St. Matthew; the New Testament; and the Acts of the Apostles.

*In January 1938, Don Belong suffered a stroke and was paralyzed. He became bed-ridden until his death on October 10, 1938, at the age of 74. He was survived by 15 of his 27 children by his three marriages. On his death bed, Don Belong lamented to his children that his only regret was that he did not meet martyrdom like Jose P. Rizal and the other patriots did.*

To view again the official Philippine Senate profile of Isabelo de los Reyes, please click on this link:

[http://www.senate.gov.ph/senators/former\\_senators/isabelo\\_delos\\_reyes.htm](http://www.senate.gov.ph/senators/former_senators/isabelo_delos_reyes.htm)

**Today, July 7, 2013, is the 149th birthday of Isabelo "Don Belong" de los Reyes. As his**

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**grandson-in-law and a charter member of the Philippine History Group of Los Angeles, CA, Bobby M. Reyes and his wife, Ceny de los Reyes-Reyes, are launching the organization of a U.S.A.-based committee to undertake preparations for the celebration in the Philippines, Canada, Spain and the U.S.A. of Don Belong's 150th birth anniversary in 2014. Further announcements will be made in this website and in Facebook at this URL: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/192316770933155/>.**

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