

Dateline San Diego, California

Empowerment at the Grassroots **By Romy Marquez** (Editor's Note: We are most honored to welcome Romy Marquez, a professional journalist, as one of our contributors. Mr. Marquez has won many literary awards, including the Media Breakfast Club-Dean Reyes Award for Journalistic and Literary Distinction in November 2001.)

On a fine morning on Thursday, April 12, about forty people joined the first-ever protest picket staged by the 13 Filipino women who work as housekeepers in the Navy's hotel and lodging facilities in San Diego, the West Coast's most famous Navy town, being home to its Pacific fleet.

The frail-bodied women held up home-made placards as they walked around in circle in front of the huge anti-submarine warfare base off Point Loma, the picturesque promontory that juts out of San Diego Bay overlooking the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean.

"Don't Trash the Housekeepers", "Be Fair and Square", "We Are Not Slaves", "Discrimination Equals Exploitation," said their placards, the message clear and unmistakable that these simple, hard-working breadwinners are crying for equality and justice.

Some people in the Filipino community, notably the fence-sitters who saw the numbers and not the message, promptly called the picket something close to a failure.

Indeed, the community did not mobilize as I expected, except for the few concerned souls who belonged to the One Vision One Voice Movement and the Majestic Lions Club. In addition, about five individuals came on their own and lent moral support.

What many did not realize was the historic significance of the event.

That this small group of abused and discriminated women would take risks in claiming their rightful place in the areas of labor and political empowerment was important enough.

That it would come from these simple folks was quite touching, if not a bit surprising.

They may look pathetic in their small numbers but the cause they're fighting for is certainly the stuff that makes legends.

It is a defining moment not so much for the workers as it is for Filipinos who have to endure discrimination and abuse in these United States.

Because of the accent of their speech, the inability to articulate in clear and precise language, the lack of high education and their quiet accepting ways, they are subjected to abuse and ridicule no less by their Filipino supervisors. It is so ironic.

Their Filipino managers looked down on them; in fact, the workers repeatedly stated they were treated like animals. "Dogs Get Better Treatment", proclaimed one of their placards, which understandably was a silent condemnation of the system that discriminates against people of color.

And so when they went out there in the community to get popular support, only one Filipino organization — the One Vision One Voice Movement under Dr. Maria Lourdes Reyes — stood up and answered their call. Out of the hundreds of associations and the thousands of members, none dared to help them. It is so sad.

Written by Romeo P. Marquez

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In the history of Filipinos in San Diego, and for that matter, in the US Navy from the time the Philippines was set free from American colonialism in 1946, there has never been such a group of courageous workers who took to the streets and told of how abuse and discrimination were being perpetrated on them because of their ethnic background.

The rest of the Filipino community was cold as stone, seeing their plight but unwilling to fight; feeling the abuse but not correcting it; closing their eyes to the wanton disregard but not wanting to redress it.

There's not even a word of condemnation from the so-called community leaders, or a letter of sympathy. What has become of the Filipino in America?

One fence-sitter had the nerve to suggest that there was no mass turnout because Dr. Reyes' OVOV was taking a lead role, therefore, it should be left alone. This is the classic case of petty jealousy, envy and the curse of Filipinos anywhere — crab mentality.

To the eternal credit of the housekeepers, they ignored the parochial politics in the community and went ahead with the protest on their own. Congressman Bob Filner (D-51st) didn't bother, too; he marched with them for about one hour and carried a placard.

Three days earlier at a meeting conducted by OVOV and the Employees Right Center's Peter Zschiesche, some workers expressed the fear of being targeted for harassment and eventual dismissal. They were afraid of being handcuffed, arrested and thrown into jail.

Dr. Reyes and Zschiesche took great pains in explaining that the US Constitution guarantees everyone the right of free speech, and therefore, they could go out there and express their displeasure at the way they're being treated by their employer, which essentially is the US government.

I had to do my own convincing and appealed to the workers to show a united front, this being the culmination of their fight for equality and justice.

I had some worries that the housekeepers would not show up and told Dr. Reyes about how I felt.

On the day of the picket, I was there 15 minutes ahead of time just to see who came in first.

Before the hour struck, the trickle of attendees had become a mass of warm bodies enthusiastic at beginning the march across the street from where they had assembled. Everyone was talking animatedly and the surge of energy was evident as we negotiated the few steps towards the main gate of the Navy base.

One after another the workers picked up their placards, got an earful of advice from Dr. Reyes and started the march on the sidewalk.

That very moment, a new chapter in Filipino political awareness was born right here in America's Finest City.

This day will go down in history as the day when lowly Filipino housekeepers showed an uncaring community the meaning of what many organizations preach but never practice — empowerment.

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