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## **The Union Obrera Democratica, by Scott**

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## Book Reviews and Notes



**The Union Obrera Democratica: First Filipino Labor Union.** By William Henry Scott. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1992.

Given the dearth of published research on the history of the Philippine labor movement, William Henry Scott's monograph, *The Union Obrera Democratica: First Filipino Labor Union*, is naturally a welcome treat. Although limited in scope, Scott focuses on what many consider to be the beginnings of the labor movement in the Philippines and on the man behind these beginnings: Isabelo de los Reyes.

After a brief survey of organized strikes during the Spanish colonial and revolutionary periods of our history, Scott describes Isabelo de los Reyes's "political education," i.e., his experiences with the press community, organized labor, and protest groups while in exile in Spain, and how these experiences influenced his political thinking. Upon his return to the Philippines in 1901, De los Reyes put this education into practice with his founding of the *Union Obrera Democratica* (UOD). At the outset, the union was much like the self-help organizations that were put up by Filipino laborers during the Spanish period, save for a number of significant differences, such as its calling for "a united stand behind any plan . . . for ameliorating labor conditions," and being "punctilious in fulfilling contracts and working hard so as to merit the increase in wages which will be asked of employers immediately" (p. 27).

Scott then proceeds to give his readers a detailed account of the union's activities. He brings his readers right into the union's meetings, as he describes the weekly gathering of its members. Such meetings consisted not only of speeches on the plight of the workers and on the gathering of support for specific campaigns, but also included dancing, poetry reading, and the staging of plays, making these meetings "educational-recreational soirees" (p. 81).

But what will probably always maintain one's attention about unions will be how a union fares insofar as the staging of strikes is concerned. From June until around August of 1902, union and nonunion workers from various factories in and around Manila staged one strike after another. The main reason for these strikes was apparently the demand for higher wages. It is unclear as to how many of these strikes actually succeeded. But Scott concludes that these were not the irresponsible actions of irresponsible workers but were planned, strategic actions by organized laborers.

It was due to these strikes that Isabelo de los Reyes was persecuted by the American press and was later tried and imprisoned. With de los Reyes's removal from the scene, Dr. Dominador Gomez took over the leadership of the UOD. As its new president, Gomez began to institute certain policy changes that would lead to the union's reorganization into a full-scale political party.

Upon Gomez's assumption to the presidency of the UOD, there were some ongoing strikes that needed to be resolved. Interestingly enough, theatrical productions of such "seditious" plays as *Hindi Aco Patay* and *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* were staged to provide funds for striking workers. And yet, Gomez organized a May 1 celebration in order to allay fears of the union's radicalism. Such an effect, however, was not achieved. The size and discipline of the rally frightened government officials and capitalists alike. When the books of the UODF (as the union was now called) were seized, it was discovered that the union was deep in debt. Gomez was then arrested on charges of sedition, brigandage, swindling, and embezzlement.

Scott concludes that in spite of its collapse, the UOD succeeded in attaining its immediate goals of raising wages and "making the strike a potent force in labor relations" (p. 73). The union also succeeded in its long-range goals as the union was the first to articulate "the concept of 'redemption' through self-determination on the part of the working class . . ." (p. 73).

While Scott should not have been expected to have provided a definitive study on the UOD in such a short work, some areas of his study could stand more elaboration. Philippine scholars interested in the career of Isabelo de los Reyes will not find very much here on his social thinking or brand of socialism. This, in itself, would make a rather interesting focus for future research. It would also have helped if Scott provided more data on the living and working conditions of Manila's laboring class.

Scott's brief work answers many initial questions that researchers may have on the beginnings of the Philippine labor movement, but it raises a number of questions as well. For example, in his conclusion, Scott points out that the union was "held together by nationalism rather than by class consciousness" (p. 72), and yet earlier on, he notes that coverage of the strikes in the Filipino press (among which were some extremely nationalistic ones) was unsympathetic. Again, the relationship between the union and the "seditious" press (if there was any) would make a worthwhile study.

All in all, Scott provides a readable, factual, and engaging account of the beginnings of the labor movement in the Philippines. Moreover, by reprinting the constitution of the UOD as drafted by de los Reyes, he does future researchers a service by making this rare document readily available.

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