

**Situating Hermenegildo Cruz: Activities of the Bureau of Labor and A Letter to Faustino
Aguilar**

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Introduction

My role in this project was a Research Assistantship under Professor Trish Kahle, as a part of the Georgetown University's Laidlaw Scholars Program. As a part of her project, "The Heart of Electrical Empire: American Electrification from Colonial Rule to Development Aid in the Philippines" I sought to understand the history of American electrification projects in the Philippines, as well as the history of labor resistance in these projects. I came to understand how workers in companies like Meralco resisted against the American colonial project, and the role of institutions like the Bureau of Labor in this resistance. For this research essay specifically, I focus on the characterization of Hermenegildo Cruz, who played a significant role as a labor organizer, leader of several trade unions and later as the Director of the Bureau of Labor.

Methodology

Foremost, I read through specific excerpts from Michael Adas's book, *Dominance by Design* and Paul Kramer's book, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* to get a better understanding of the history of the Philippines during and after the colonial era. I also read Prof. Kahle's works on the history of energy labor elsewhere around the world to get a general sense of the project, as well as excerpts from Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* to get a better understanding of historical research projects and its limitations.

For primary sources, this research relied on archival materials housed at the Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room at the Library of Congress, and at the Rizal Library at the Ateneo De Manila University. As a starting point, my faculty mentor isolated dates when significant protests occurred at Meralco, so I could look into the newspaper coverage of those events. I went through the Library of Congress's digital catalogue to identify English-language

newspapers that had coverage of these dates, considering my language abilities. My mentor then made a key list of things to look out for in the paper: key figures of Meralco and the labor movement, advertisements and headlines from Meralco, political cartoons about Meralco, etc., to go through and reproduce a digital copy. These copies were then dated and catalogued in Zotero for future reading and analysis for the project.

At the Rizal Library at the Ateneo De Manila University, we utilized both digital catalogues and physical finding aids to identify materials that could be useful, sorting through key dates she had identified earlier, as well as reports and materials produced by governmental institutions in the Philippines concerning electrical projects and laborers. As photos were not allowed in the collections, we relied on note-taking, using a mix of summarizing and direct quotations from the materials for future use. We also consulted with the librarians at the Rizal Library to get a list of materials related to key historical figures, sorting through those materials according to date and content. We then reproduced those materials through note-taking and organized them in the Zotero app for further reference. We also consulted and took notes on secondary sources housed at the library that concerned our research topic.

For my writing, I chose specific primary source materials authored by Hermenegildo Cruz, as his role in the wider labor movement interested me. I then read Maria Bianca S. Maranan's paper, "Proletarian, Unionist, Socialist: Hermenegildo Cruz and Socialism in the Early Philippine Labor Movement, 1899–1919", to get a better understanding of his standing in the Filipino labor movement.

Close Reading

In this section, I will demonstrate a close reading of two primary source documents authored by Hermenegildo Cruz, a labor activist and trade union organizer who later headed the Bureau of Labor under the insular government.

Hermenegildo Cruz's later career is most often read as the endpoint of a long retreat from the socialism of his youth, and Maria Bianca Maranan gives the most recent version of this reading, tracing his turn to "economism," the belief that workers should seek harmony with capital and stay separate from independent politics.¹ She also argues that Cruz retreats to elitism through active involvement with the Nacionalista party, and integrates into institutions of American colonial rule.² As part of this narrative, she places the Bureau of Labor, which Cruz came to direct, in the same department as the Constabulary, hinting that the two belonged to a single colonial apparatus.³ This essay seeks to complicate that understanding against two of Cruz's own documents, written for very different audiences. I argue that the Bureau's public report fits the economist Cruz that Maranan describes, but that his letter written four years later shows him treating the Constabulary as an obstacle to the Bureau's work. In doing so, I frame the Bureau and the Constabulary as institutions in tension, and Cruz as someone defending the Bureau's method of mediation against the Constabulary's enforcement of order.

This essay relies on three sources. The first is the Bureau of Labor's 1930 report, *The Activities of the Bureau of Labor*, which carries a Foreword by Cruz and was written for a public audience. The second is a correspondence letter from Cruz to Aguilar in 1934, of which I focus on the section headed "Fourth Suggestion." While I cannot locate Aguilar's role in the Bureau of

¹ Maria Bianca S. Maranan, "Proletarian, Unionist, Socialist: Hermenegildo Cruz and Socialism in the Early Philippine Labor Movement, 1899–1919," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 74, no. 2 (2026): 177–208, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/993857>.

² Ibid. 195–196.

³ Ibid. 197.

Labor definitely, he is said to have “served across different branches of government, including work connected to the Department of Labor”.⁴ The third is Maranan's article, which I treat as the secondary framework to be tested. I read the two primary sources closely for how each frame strikes, who each identifies as the source of the problem, and what each asks its reader to do. I also draw on newspaper coverage of the Meralco strikes, since it shows how strike-time policing appeared in practice. Because the letter is a single section, claims about Cruz cannot be generalized, and thus should be treated as a close reading limited to two short primary sources.

Maranan's Reading of Cruz and the Bureau of Labor

Maranan describes Cruz as a labor leader with humble beginnings, starting as a print worker and gradually coming to lead Filipino trade unions.⁵ At seventeen, Cruz led the 1899 strike at the revolutionary paper *La Independencia*⁶, and in 1904 he wrote the constitution of the Balangay ng mga Tipografo⁷, which called for collective ownership of the means of production⁸. She argues that over the following years, he opposed an independent workers' party, aligned the movement with the elite Nacionalista Party⁹, and took a series of government posts that ended in the directorship of the Bureau of Labor. In her article, Cruz's economism encourages workers to foster harmony with capital even when a colonial state keeps them in place.¹⁰

However, I am more concerned with her framing of the Bureau itself rather than Cruz's economism. She notes that the Bureau was created under the Department of Commerce and

⁴ “Faustino Aguilar,” *The Notable People Project*, accessed October 3, 2026, https://notablepeopleproject.org/faustino_aguilar.

⁵ Maranan, “Proletarian, Unionist, Socialist,” 179.

⁶ Ibid. 179.

⁷ Ibid. 182.

⁸ Ibid. 183.

⁹ Ibid. 196.

¹⁰ Ibid. 179

Police, which also housed the Constabulary and the Bureau of Prisons, "two fundamental state apparatuses that utilized violence" to maintain control over colonized subjects.¹¹ She also points out that one of the Bureau's stated purposes was to avert strikes by inducing arbitration.¹² As such, the Bureau appears in her narrative as continuous with its neighbors, its work of pacification running alongside the colonial work of policing. It is important to state that she does not say outright that the Bureau functioned as a police instrument, but the placement of the Bureau within the Department of Commerce implies that it was largely under the same colonial framework of subjugation. Her evidence also largely stops around 1926, so I am applying it to 1930 and 1934 as an extension of her argument.

The Public Face of the Bureau

The 1930 report fits the economist Cruz that Maranan describes, and it is unusually explicit about the audience it is trying to win. In the Foreword, Cruz states that the report is meant to "dispel any prejudices" against the Bureau, so that the public, "particularly the laboring class," will come to appreciate its work in the interest of "laborers and employers in particular, and of the community in general."¹³ This signifies that the report is a document of persuasion before it is a document of record. It builds trust by presenting the Bureau as serving everyone at once, with the community named as the final beneficiary of labor and capital getting along.

This purpose shapes how strikes appear throughout the report. The report mentions that the Bureau sought to instill in both sides, "particularly the laborers," the necessity of "cooperation, mutual good will and understanding between the two factors of production".¹⁴ It

¹¹ Maranan. 197.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *The Activities of the Bureau of Labor* (Manila: Bureau of Labor, 1930), Foreword.

¹⁴ *The Activities of the Bureau of Labor*, 10.

also takes pride in resolving conflicts "within the shortest possible time" and in never having filed a case in court.¹⁵ A strike here is a shared harm, and success is measured by a quick return to work, although the report never clarifies whether that speed protects workers from lost wages or industry from lost output. In either case, the report emphasizes the end of the stoppage rather than the grievance of the workers behind it, which resembles the outlook Maranan finds in Cruz's 1915 speech, where he praised reforms won without friction between capital and labor.¹⁶

The report also backs this rhetoric with tangible actions. The Bureau could intervene in disputes without a petition or government order, and it followed a process of fact-finding, conciliation, an arbitration committee, an appointed arbitrator, and finally referral to the courts.¹⁷ It also enforced rules on employer liability for injury, banned wage payment in anything but legal tender, regulated the employment of women and children, and helped prosecute peonage and usury.¹⁸ Even so, the "both sides" framing is not neutral. The lesson in cooperation is aimed "particularly" at laborers, and the circular on safety makes its case first in the employers' terms, citing the "cost of labor turnover" and the "materials spoiled by inexperienced men" before turning, "above all," to the pain of the injured and the misery of widows and children.¹⁹ In doing so, Cruz persuades employers without alarming them, and the response, in which almost all of about 500 large establishments requested safety materials²⁰, suggests that the strategy worked because it never asked employers to see their interests as opposed to the workers'.

¹⁵ Ibid. 11.

¹⁶ Maranan. 199.

¹⁷ *The Activities of the Bureau of Labor*, 8-10

¹⁸ Ibid. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid. 26.

²⁰ *The Activities of the Bureau of Labor*, 26.

The Constabulary as an Obstacle to Settlement

The letter to Aguilar does a different kind of work. Rather than defending the Bureau to an audience of doubters, it identifies a problem inside the government and asks for a decision. In the "Fourth Suggestion," Cruz describes what happens in practice when the Bureau is working to settle a strike: laborers "submit their case to the government for settlement," while the Constabulary comes in "with the end in view of maintaining order, protecting to all intents and purposes the scabs or strike-breakers."²¹ The phrase "to all intents and purposes" is revealing, as it acknowledges that the Constabulary's stated aim is order while insisting that its actual effect is to shield those who "snatch away or fill the works of the strikers."²² Cruz here makes a claim about whose side the police power ends up serving.

The contrast with the report is sharp. The report never concedes that part of the state might be working against workers, whereas the letter makes that contradiction its central complaint, saying that it places "the government itself in a ridiculous situation".²³ The word "ridiculous" matters because it frames the problem as a failure of coherence. Workers who have trusted the state to mediate are being undercut by the same state, and the government cannot credibly claim to be a neutral settler of disputes while its police protect one party's replacements. Moreover, by asking that the Constabulary's policy be defined "once and for all,"²⁴ Cruz treats its conduct as a question the government must answer in principle and not as an unfortunate accident. The letter is addressed to a single official, Faustino Aguilar, so its audience is narrower

²¹ Hermenegildo Cruz to Faustino Aguilar, May 2, 1934, "Fourth Suggestion," Cruz Collection, box 2-A, folder 1, Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University.

²² Cruz to Aguilar, "Fourth Suggestion."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

than the report's, which makes it less likely that Cruz was writing to shape public opinion. It is more plausible that we are seeing what he thought about how strikes were actually handled.

Newspaper coverage on the Meralco strikes also confirm a broader pattern of strike-time policing—coverage of the 1909, 1919, and 1932 strikes repeatedly mentions constabulary and police deployed on the streetcars and escorting workers to their posts.²⁵ Maranan's account of 1919 points the same way, since the mayor used the company's complaints to appoint new patrolmen and buy arms for the police, and this happened while the Bureau was investigating the company and finding it guilty of nonpayment and of refusing to recognize labor representatives.²⁶ Cruz's letter does not refer to Meralco specifically, but this pattern shows two parts of the state acting on the same strike in different ways, one gathering facts against the employer and the other reinforcing the means of order.

Two Institutions, Two Logics

This bears directly on how Maranan places the Bureau. In her account, sharing a department with the Constabulary ties the Bureau to the state's coercive side, yet the letter shows the two agencies in tension. The Bureau is trying to mediate, the Constabulary acts in a way that undermines mediation, and Cruz appeals to other offices to align the latter with the former. As such, the Bureau does not appear here as the Constabulary's institutional twin but as an office with its own method, which Cruz sought to defend against the state's other method of enforcing order by police. The Meralco case supports this, because the Bureau's findings against the company did not prevent the colonial government's interests from prevailing²⁷, and this suggests that the

²⁵ Cable News American's coverage of strikes in Meralco in 1909, 1919 and 1932 mentions the use of constabulary to protect the strike-breakers, and even escorting them to their workplace.

²⁶ Maranan. 201-202.

²⁷ Maranan. 202.

Bureau had a function that did not match the apparatus around it, even if it could not win against that apparatus.

This does not refute Maranan, and I do not read Cruz as a hidden radical. The Bureau was founded to avert strikes, and the report celebrates quick settlements. The harm Cruz names in the letter is damage to "amicable settlement" and the creation of "more troubles and misunderstandings between labor and capital," which is still the language of harmony.²⁸ His second question concedes that police cooperation might be "necessary in the interests of the community" and asks only how far it should go.²⁹ He is also plainly concerned for his own office, since a government made to look "ridiculous" is one whose mediators lose authority. The harmony Cruz promoted in public is what gives him the standard by which the Constabulary's conduct counts as a failure, and so the two documents are connected rather than opposed.

There are also some limitations to using these sources as evidence. First, the letter is a single section, nothing shows that anyone acted on it, and I do not know Aguilar's role specifically, which affects how candid Cruz would have been in his writing. Second, a letter to a single official is still written for an audience, and Cruz may have had strategic reasons for writing as he did. Third, the word "violence" comes from Maranan and not from the letter, so my claim is that Cruz questioned the Constabulary's part in strikes, not that he condemned force as such.

Conclusion

Cruz wrote about strikes in two registers. In the Bureau's report, he presents a neutral institution serving employers, employees, and the community, and measures its success by cooperation and

²⁸ Hermenegildo Cruz to Faustino Aguilar, May 2, 1934.

²⁹ Ibid.

speed. In the letter to Aguilar, he recognizes that the state he served could undermine its own mediation by protecting strikebreakers, and he asks for that to stop. Taken together, the documents complicate Maranan's suggestion that the Bureau of Labor and the Constabulary belonged to one apparatus. They show instead two institutions pulling in different directions, with Cruz defending mediation against order enforced by police. He was still an economist in Maranan's sense, and still not the striker of 1899, but it would be wrong to read his work at the Bureau of Labor as simply settling into colonial bureaucracy.

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