

The Meralco Empire: American Power, Electrification, and Development in the Philippines

Pragyan Sharma

School of Foreign Service

Georgetown University

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Trish Kahle, International History

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Introduction

Following the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Philippines suddenly found itself under American colonial rule. This inaugurated a new period of foreign rule that not only sought to establish American political authority, but also to transform the archipelago's economic and social infrastructure. Colonial officials, modelling this 'development' after the United States, presented these projects of infrastructure and policies to bring in 'modernization' to the Filipino people, continually citing the duty of the United States to 'civilise' and 'modernize'¹ the people of the Philippines before they could attain the ability to self govern. Among these projects, electrification projects occupied an important position. The construction of this electrical infrastructure connected the Philippines to new forms of American capital, technology, and expertise while simultaneously extending colonial institutions into everyday life.

As the capital as well as the economic and political hub of the Philippine islands, Manila became the key site for the development of electrification projects. The Manila Electric Railroad & Light Company, or Meralco, played a central role in the generation and supply of electric power throughout Manila's urban landscape during the American colonial period. Until this day, Meralco's franchise area in Manila and beyond represent more than half of the Philippines' total electricity consumption². While Meralco's history is increasingly talked about and continues to occupy an important space in the history of the Philippine Economy itself, the labor that went into expanding and sustaining these electrification infrastructure is seldom talked about. Examining Meralco's relationship with its employees not only presents the intricacy of the Filipino labor class under American colonial rule, but also reveals the struggles over labor,

¹ Adas, Michael. *Dominance by Design : Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674020078>. 139.

² Meralco, "Corporate Profile", Meralco, Accessed August 14, 2026. <https://company.meralco.com.ph/corporate-profile>

rights, and collective action. Strikes and forms of labor organizing became important sites through which Meralco's workers articulated their demands and contested the terms of their employment, while Meralco developed its own ways of responding to these challenges. Tracing these forms of labor organizing offers a lens into the development of labor relations within the Philippine electrical industry and the ways in which both the workers and the company approached labor collectivism. Thus, this paper will explore the contested relationship between Meralco's American employers and the Filipino laborers, giving an insight into how they perceived and experienced labor activism.

Methodology

Foremost, I read through secondary literature to get a better understanding of the history of the Philippines during and after the colonial era. I also read literature on the history of energy labor elsewhere around the world to get a general sense of the project, as well as readings on historical research to get a better understanding of history research projects. 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. While we planned to go through materials from the broader electrification history of the Philippines, Meralco emerged as the biggest and the most important project to trace the labor of Filipino electric workers. As a starting point, my faculty mentor helped isolate 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 professor then helped me make 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 we 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 quotation 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. They were then reproduced through notetaking and appropriate organization in the Zotero app for further reference. Secondary sources housed at the library that concerned our research topic were also consulted and reproduced.

These materials were then analyzed through a close reading of the newspaper coverage and notes and to uncover stories and narratives to better understand the electrical labor activism and Meralco's response to it. As certain themes emerged from the materials, these were drawn into research findings.

Research Findings

Major documented strikes occurred at Meralco throughout the colonial era, from the early 1910's and well into the 1930's. To understand the strikes, it is first necessary to understand the positionality that the Americans and the Filipinos occupied in Meralco and the Philippine society at that time. As written in *Meralco: A Century of Service*, "by and large, the expat community

did not mix socially with the Filipinos, whom most considered their inferiors”³. This also translated well into Meralco’s hierarchy—most of the managers were Americans, with the laboring class being the Filipinos. Even in the later years, when a few Filipinos attained higher ranks within the company, the treatment given to the Filipinos versus the Americans was very easily distinguishable. Raoul Villanueva, who joined Meralco in 1949 recalls: “we Filipinos were in an office whose walls were corrugated iron sheets, and the room was without a ceiling. So it was really hot. We only had electric fans for cooling. So you were forced to work in your undershirt. The Americans were in air-conditioned rooms. My father was not yet the comptroller, he was the cashier at the time. He was together with us in that room, while the American supervisors who were of lower rank than my father were together in air-conditioned rooms. That was the way it was then in Meralco”⁴. This exemplifies the racialized division prevalent in Meralco, and how the company viewed its Filipino workers.

The Dismissal of the Strikes

This dichotomy between the Americans and the Filipinos translated into the American executives’ response to the several strikes and protests during the colonial rule—a dismissive one. The Managers of Meralco viewed the Filipino laborers as easily replaceable, constantly defending the impact of the strikes in the language that a lot of Filipinos were still applying to get jobs at Meralco, and that striking workers could be easily replaced. This degraded the place of the racialized Filipino worker even more inside Meralco, as one could be easily replaced by another worker.

³ Raul Rodrigo, *Meralco: A Century of Service, 1903–2003* (Pasig City: Eugenio Lopez Foundation, 2004), Filipiniana Collection, Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University, call no. FIL HD9685.P54 M38, 47.

⁴ Ibid., 86.

Meralco's statements about the strikes also subdued the level of violence during the strike, often giving statements such as "no violence of importance had occurred"⁵ and "the situation is well in hand"⁶ to the newspapers. Even during a bombing incident during one of the strikes, newspaper coverage was centered around the quick capturing of the perpetrator, and the efficiency of the secret service, instead of the damage caused. This hints towards the racialized image of the weaker, child-like Filipino men (considering most electrical workers were men) compared to the more masculine American men that Michael Adas talks about in *Dominance by Design*⁷. Meralco's defensive stance builds a narrative that a strike called by the weaker Filipino laborers could easily be subdued by, and did not have much effect on, the much stronger and masculine American executives. However, a close reading of the newspaper sources counters that narrative. During all major strikes in 1909, 1919 and 1932, the newspapers mention that countless constabulary and policemen were deployed in Meralco's streetcars, and Meralco workers were often guided by the police force to their workplaces. The deployment of heavy forces during the strike periods signified that the American authorities perceived the strikes as a serious security threat, and deployed security forces to counter that threat. Newspaper coverage also details the Governor General's involvement, which signifies that the strikes were perceived with a very serious threat by the government officials. This is detailed in a 1909 protest's coverage: "Asked yesterday morning when he expected to leave for Baguio the Governor General replied that as long as there was possible trouble in connection with the strikes of the operatives of the Manila Electric Railroad and Light Company he would remain in Manila as was the duty of the chief executive"⁸.

⁵ "But Little Violence Accompanies the Trolley Strike," *Cable News American*, March 5, 1909, Library of Congress.

⁶ "Meralco Strike is Fizzling Out," *Cable News American*, June 5, 1919, Library of Congress.

⁷ Adas, *Dominance by Design*, 161.

⁸ "Governor General Stays Till End of Strike," *Cable News American*, March 7, 1909, Library of Congress.

The dismissal also took the form of denying the Meralco workers' dissatisfaction itself. During a 1909 strike, General Manager C.E. Graves is quoted: "In order that you can judge as to the attitude of the company in this case, I will tell you that two weeks before the men abandoned their positions I gathered all the personnel and asked them if they had any complaint to make and if they were satisfied with the treatment they were receiving. They unanimously declared that they had no complaints and that the treatment they received was satisfactory"⁹. By denying that the workers had any grievances, Graves asserts that the workers had been easily influenced to take part in the protest, lacking their own independent judgement. This denial of the worker's dissatisfaction is also seen further during the 1919 protests in Rockwell's response to demands for increased wages. He is quoted, "the demand for more pay will be governed by the finding of two men who already have been started in gathering data to determine whether the cost of living for the men has increased since the last wage advance, when a survey was made regarding living conditions and the advance made sufficient to more than offset the recent advances in the cost of living"¹⁰. In doing so, Rockwell denies the Filipino laborer's independent agency in deciding what wage they should have, and instead puts a paternalistic approach signifying that Filipino workers need the American employers to decide what is good for them. Moreover, attempts to institutionalise any kind of Filipino agency is also quashed as Meralco constantly dismisses labor organizations, instead mandating to deal with the workers individually: "[they] quit their posts without previous notice and without apparently consulting their organization.....indicate that they have not as yet sufficient cohesion and unity of purpose to agree on concerted action and

⁹ "Manager Graves of Trolley Concern Talks Out," *Cable News American*, March 13, 1909, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ "Meralco Men Vote to Demand More Pay," *Cable News American*, March 1, 1919, Library of Congress.

that whatever agreements might be made with the union such would not necessarily be adhered to”¹¹.

Dignity and Upliftment through Organizing

As Filipino laborers were rendered voiceless and stripped of their agency as independent decision makers, they seemed to resort to strikes not only as a form of bargaining but also as a means of upliftment and gaining dignity. Instead of just using the strikes as a collective bargaining in terms of wages, working hours, and working conditions, they used the strikes as a means of regaining agency from the American executives.

In the 1919 strikes, Domingo Simeon of the Filipino Labor Congress is quoted during an interview: “We demand no reemployment of our men by Meralco: what we fight for, and shall continue to fight for to the bitter end, is the recognition of the rights of the strikers and the Filipino Labor Congress by the officials of the company”¹². Here, the Labor Congress is not just fighting against unjust dismissal, but also to center the rights of the Filipino workers to negotiate and demand rights as people. As such, Simeon’s interview is demanding the recognition of the Filipino Labor Congress to center the voice of the Filipino workers, who have so far been dismissed as weak, insensible and a class that needs paternalistic protection from the American managers. As such, a collective strike stands out as a better path to agency for the Filipino workers who have constantly been dismissed to be dealt with individually.

Moreover, in the same interview, Simeon says: “Not until Meralco recognizes the fact that it is dealing with responsible men, shall we stop heaping upon it the discredit and dishonor that it deserves”¹³. The phrasing of the demand such that Meralco recognize the strikers as “responsible men” hints that they have so far not been taken as responsible, sensible men by the

¹¹ “The Meralco Situation,” *Cable News American*, March 8, 1919, editorial, Library of Congress.

¹² “Fight Has Just Begun, Asserts Strike Leader,” *Cable News American*, June 15, 1919, Library of Congress.

¹³ Ibid.

American executives at Meralco. This signifies that the Filipino laborers at Meralco, through the Filipino Labor Congress, wanted to be seen as independent, responsible men who can make their own decisions, and can bargain based on what they need.

This desire, as seen in Simeon's interview, seeks to counter the racial assumptions of insensibility, and inferiority inflicted upon the Filipinos by the Americans, using organizing and striking as a means of uplifting themselves and gaining dignity.

Conclusion

Meralco's labor history shows that American colonial rule in the Philippines operated not only through formal political institutions, but also in the everyday management of electric workers. Meralco's American executives dismissed Filipino laborers as insensible and easily replaceable, denying them the agency to bargain for their own wages and conditions. However, the constabulary deployments, the Governor General's continued presence during the strikes, and the government's sustained attention to the strikers' demands tell a different story: the colonial authorities took Filipino labor organizing far more seriously than they were willing to admit.

For the Filipino laborers themselves, strikes became more than a means of negotiating wages. As Domingo Simeon's demand that Meralco recognize strikers as "responsible men" makes clear, organizing was also a way of contesting the racial assumptions built into the colonial workplace, and of reclaiming the dignity that Meralco's paternalism had denied them. As such, infrastructure meant to demonstrate the benevolence of American rule instead became a site through which Filipino workers asserted their own worth.

Further Research

This essay relied primarily on newspaper coverage and Meralco's own history, which prioritizes the perspectives of labor leaders and company executives while leaving the experiences of on ground workers less visible. Further research drawing on oral histories or union records could help center these voices more directly. Additionally, while this paper focused on the colonial period, the Villanueva account suggests that the racialized hierarchies within Meralco persisted well after Philippine independence in 1946, raising the question of how labor relations at Meralco changed, or did not change after independence. Moreover, situating Meralco's labor history alongside other American colonial infrastructure projects could also help clarify whether my findings in this paper were specific to Meralco or characteristic of American colonial labor management more broadly.

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