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

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Introduction

In this project, 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. He is often characterized as an economist in his later life, and I test that framework here.

Methodology

- Reviewed secondary literature on Philippine colonial history and global energy labor history
- Identified key strike dates (1909, 1919, 1932) with faculty mentor guidance
- Searched Library of Congress digital newspaper archives for English-language coverage of these strikes
- Consulted physical and digital finding aids at the Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University
- Took notes and direct quotations (photography not permitted), cataloged in Zotero
- Close-read newspaper coverage and archival notes to identify recurring themes

Findings

- Public face of the Bureau: Cruz presented the Bureau as a neutral mediator serving laborers, employers, and the community, emphasizing cooperation, mutual good will, and quick settlements rather than workers' grievances.
- Strikes as shared harm: The 1930 report framed strikes as disruptions to both sides, measuring success by ending stoppages quickly while avoiding attention to whether workers or employers bore greater costs.
- The contradiction: Cruz's 1934 letter reveals a different view, arguing that the Constabulary undermined the Bureau's mediation by protecting strikebreakers, creating a situation in which the government itself became "ridiculous."
- Two institutions, two logics: The Bureau pursued fact-finding, conciliation, and arbitration, while the Constabulary prioritized order; Cruz treated this tension as a problem requiring government intervention rather than evidence that both institutions served one unified purpose.

Limitations and Reflection

- Limited evidence: The letter is a single section, and there is no evidence that its recommendations were acted upon, limiting what can be concluded about Cruz's broader position.
- Strategic audience: The letter was addressed to one official, and Cruz may have had strategic reasons for presenting the Constabulary as a problem, making it difficult to treat the letter as a complete statement of his views.
- Working with limited sources: The project showed me that close reading requires making arguments from incomplete evidence; while I wanted more time with the Cruz collections, I learned to incorporate limited primary sources into a broader historical narrative while recognizing the need for further research.

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