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

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Introduction

Following the 1898 Spanish-American War, the Philippines came under American colonial rule, which brought projects of "modernization" and infrastructure development. Electrification was central to this effort, and Manila Electric Railroad & Light Company (Meralco) became the key site of Philippine electrification, still supplying over half the country's electricity today. While Meralco's institutional history is well documented, the labor behind it is not. This project examines Meralco's relationship with its Filipino workers--through strikes and labor organizing--to understand how American colonial power operated through everyday labor relations.

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

- Racial hierarchy at Meralco: American executives held power; Filipino laborers occupied subordinate roles, with visibly unequal treatment (e.g., segregated, unequal working conditions) persisting even as Filipinos rose in rank.
- Dismissal of strikes: Meralco publicly downplayed strikes as minor and workers as easily replaceable, denying any real grievances. Company statements framed Filipino workers as lacking independent judgment.
- The contradiction: Despite this dismissive rhetoric, constabulary and police were repeatedly deployed during strikes, and the Governor General personally stayed in Manila to monitor the situation--evidence that colonial authorities viewed labor organizing as a serious threat.
- Strikes as dignity, not just bargaining: Filipino labor leaders like Domingo Simeon framed strikes as a demand for recognition as "responsible men," using collective action to contest racial assumptions of inferiority and reclaim agency denied by Meralco's paternalism.

Conclusion and Further Research

- Meralco's labor history shows that American colonial rule operated not only through political institutions, but through the everyday management of infrastructure and workers. Public dismissiveness masked real threats--colonial authorities took Filipino labor organizing far more seriously than they admitted. For Filipino workers, strikes became a means of contesting racial hierarchy and reclaiming dignity, not just negotiating wages.
- Further research could recover rank-and-file worker perspectives through oral histories or union records, trace how Meralco's labor relations changed after Philippine independence in 1946, and compare Meralco to labor patterns at other American colonial infrastructure projects.

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