

Virgil Paz

Interviewer Don Bouzek

VP: I'm working at Edmonton Public School. I'm a member of CUPE Local 474.

Q: Which part of the Philippines are you from?

VP: I live in Manilla, the capital of the Philippines. I was born there. All of us, they call us Manilla boys.

Q: Which part of Manilla?

VP: In the university belt, university area, all the action right there. When I was in high school, that's the start, in 1971. The mass rally and everything's happening there because of one guy, Marcos.

Q: What were people protesting with Marcos?

VP: The militarization, that's one thing that we don't like. The student, the cost of living is getting tougher. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer. That's the start of it.

Q: Talk a bit out your experiences with those demonstrations.

VP: First time I went to the rally was when I was in fourth year. It started from the student in my country. In the university area, all the student have their own group; they form their own group. Tuition fee increased, and that's the time I started going to that rally, because I was affected by the tuition fee increase because of no funding of public education in my country; only private. If you want a good education you have to go in private education. In my country, public education is the worst education that you can get, that's why I go in a private school, Catholic private school. But the tuition fee is getting higher every time. Every year it go higher and higher and higher until that's the time then the student unrest started. We cannot afford it anymore.

Q: After a while, others joined the students.

VP: Yea. Everything started from the student, student protest. We started from indignation rally, that's all we do as a student. We do the indignation rally what the government are doing to us. Then after that we have the support. The next rally and the next week like that, the labour movement will be joining us. After the labour movement do the rally, the next group will join us again: the umbrella organization, the Political Party of the Philippines, the Bayan, and with the support of the clergies. They discuss it in church, too, because everybody are affected by that hardship. Everybody are involved, that's why we have a big mass movement all the time. It start from student, then the worker, then the professional, the clergy, and the opposition what we call here in Canada, the opposition will join us in one voice. We call it the Parliament of the Street. Here we don't have a parliament in the street. That's what we need here, because that's only they can hear when the people are crying. That's the time they listen, but sometimes they don't listen either.

Q: When you were talking to me before Christmas, you were talking about one particular rally where people would come from separate parts of the city.

VP: That's the strategy. We start from the university belt, and everybody will be. Some workers in the factory, they work. Nobody's taking a ride, everybody will walk. If I will go to that one big plaza in Mendiola, the bridge there close to the palace, everybody will come from different direction. Start from the university, some from the working factory, then some from the garden front of the seminary, and the professional will be there too. We will converge at particular time, we will converge in one particular place. Some take bus and then walk. They have a meeting place all the time that's the designated post. For the student we start from the university, some other groups maybe from their office or churches.

Q: Was there a demonstration that involved a bed?

VP: Oh I still remember that; that's the worst part – the farmers rally. I was there supporting the farmers of our country. They just become worker, they don't own the land. Nobody own the land there; the multinational own the land there. It's just like slave labourers. When Marcos leave the country and Cory Aquino came into power, he promised the worker that the palace will be open for anybody. The farmers went to the palace, and you know what happened? I was in the front line with my buddy and we were walking clenched, chained arm. Then I saw my neighbour, a police officer, he told me, oh get out of there, don't stay there. There will be big trouble after when you reach the foot of the bridge. So I listened to my neighbour, because he was concerned. He was just living across my place. I move out that line, and after maybe five minutes they start shooting all the farmers. The blood spill all over the street. You can see they just dragging all the dead bodies around. That's my experience. Too much militarization. If they don't want to listen, they just shoot you. If you are protesting, they brand you as a Communist sympathizer. But actually, we are Nationalists, I'm a Nationalist. I'm concerned about Filipino people. I'm not a Communist, I don't live in China. But once you protest, you are automatically branded as a Communist sympathizer, just to shut you off and put you in jail. But I'm lucky I never got to jail, because I'm just a Nationalist. Now I'm a Canadian Nationalist now. I'm concerned about Canadians now.

Q: You mentioned that you had big puppets and effigies.

VP: That was when I was teaching in the university. I'm a Fine Arts professor. One of my co-faculties, leader of the biggest women's group there, the Gabriela. . . Actually Gabriela's name means our women heroes who are fighting for freedom against the Spaniards. That's the name they formed – Gabriela. He told me I can give him a hand, we gonna make some effigy of Marcos. That's the Marcos regime. We do it in her place. I do the head, someone do the body parts like the hand and the legs. We just put it together in front of the bridge. They didn't know that we put lots of firecrackers in the head, because we gonna burn the effigy of Marcos. The rally started and we assembled the big Marcos lying in the bed with the ? on his arm, dying. Then we light it up. I'm not the one who light it up, somebody light it up, and the explosion was like a firework display in the front of the bridge. That's the time when we are leaving the rally and you can see it far away as it's exploding. What he did to us, the Filipinos, it's worth doing

that thing. It satisfied your urge just to get back to him, disrespecting him like that. He done some good things, too, but the militarization is the worst part that he introduced in my country.

Q: Were you there during the changeover and the People Power movement?

VP: Yea I'm there.

Q: What was that like?

VP: We had the support of the military, that's why he get out of the country, because of the support of the underground officers movement of the armed forces of the Philippines. They call it the RAM, Gringo Honasan, he's now a parliamentarian in my country. But with the support of the military, because they don't follow dictators. They know that Marcos is a dictator, but they form a young new breed of officer who are fighting for the people, they're not fighting for the bureaucrats. They change their way. They have their own bylaws and things like that, that they will not support any dictatorship to be happen again in my country. That's the start of the downfall of the Marcos regime, because of this military young officers who fight against the old regime.

Q: Were you there when the changeover of government occurred?

VP: Yea I was there, all the rallies I was there. All the people, not only me, the whole country is on the other side against the government. There are lots of Marcos loyalists too, but at the end they back out. My brother is a Marcos loyalist, because he's in the military. We have different ideology. My brother is more on the military side: follow what the general order.

Q: That must've been an amazing feeling.

VP: Later when we found that out, yea. I'm right, we finally find out I'm right.

Q: Also just the sense of having overthrown Marcos.

VP: During that time Marcos left the country and my brother is still in the palace fighting for Marcos. When he went back to the country in our house he was so pale and scared, because lots of people surround the whole palace. He was scared. He threw his gun, he removed his uniform, and go like a civilian again now. People's Power, we call it People's Power. I believe in People's Power.

Q: What led to your decision to come to Canada?

VP: I leave the country. I have a good job there, I was teaching at the university there. But my mom told me, Canada is a good place, why don't you try it? All my sister lives here. They petitioned me and then my family we went here and that's it. I'm now in Canada and I'm a Canadian now.

Q: Although the education system in the Philippines is good, it's not acknowledged here.

VP: Yea. I was teaching for ten years – two years in elementary and two years in the university. But when you go to Canada you have to upgrade everything. But my experience, I have some awards and certificates, winning some national competition in painting. I was doing some teaching too of disabled, like sculpture, and some restoration work. I attended some seminar on restoration. But everything changed here. Still, I have a family and that's why I have to work now. I cannot go back to school. Lots of professional, all the Filipino who came in Canada are all professional, I'm telling you. They are all professional. Nurses become nanny. Like me professor, I'm a custodian. But at least I live in a free country. I like Canada. Nowadays when I'm looking back again, they're starting to do it here in Canada. The privatization thing. In the hospital in my country, it's all private. The public hospital don't have medicine. Those who are in a public hospital are all trainees or students. The professionals go private, and you have to pay all the bills there. You pay the room, pay the doctor, pay the anesthesiology, pay everything, pay the food. That's the private thing there. There's a joke. They say that when you get a heart attack and you go to the hospital, when you receive your bill you gonna get a second heart attack because of private thing. And they're doing privatization in the school, that's the worst part. In

public school, we have a good public school here. When it goes commercialism in public education, you can feel the worst to come, when they privatize everything in public education. That's why I don't believe they say fee increase will help. Yea, for the start, but they want to get the profits at the end. They will not give you money without profits. If it's private, they need to get profits from that thing if they give you money and that.

Q: What were your experiences with privatization?

VP: Privatization, everything. You buy your own books, buy your food. No nurses in the school. You pay everything. They're doing it here a little bit, but still if we have government support public education, we still okay. But once the private, you can see now they sponsor, it's commercialism. You can see all the pop cans there, all the pop machine around the school. It's commercialism on public education. I have one experience where teacher are the one filling it up now. I don't want to mention the school. They fill up the pop machine; I can't believe that.

Q: You were part of CUPE's campaign against this kind of privatization.

VP: Oh sure. Not only 474, the whole CUPE, even that national, against this kind of privatization. PPP, Public Private Partnership. It won't work, I'm telling you it won't work. It was done in my country a long time ago and they're just introducing it here.

Q: What did they do in the Philippines that you see happening here?

VP: Just comparing the public school, all the finances go to private school. All the old books go to the public school, because they don't pay. All the obsolete books go to the public school. All the new books go to the private school, because they will make money there.

Q: Did you participate in campaigns against privatization here?

VP: Privatization, as long as you're CUPE, you're against Public Private Partnership. It's automatic.

Q: I notice you're at most of the meetings and you're fairly active in your union local.

VP: My experience living in my country with all those private, those multinational, I am a full bank. Those things are not good, it won't help anything. Like our natural resources, I am a full bank. They give you a loan, they took all your natural resources. They cut all your trees until it get bald. In art, the Animation Group, it's a private company from the United States. They go to my country. All my cousins are working like slave doing that work with drawings and animation. They just run, the whole building nothing. They don't pay my cousin, thousands of pesos. They just go out. Once they finish the project, they just disappear, nothing. You cannot chase them into the United States. Those are multinational corporation. They will invest but they will take off.

Q: I don't think people understand how those cartoon films are made.

VP: Yea, it's manual – the animation, the in betweeners, the backgrounders. One of my cousin is a backgrounder, one is an illustrator, he draw the start of the movement and the end of the movement. One will divide it into a movement to seven parts or five parts. The hand is here and the end part the hand will go down, so you will draw this one and this one, and you will cut it here. Between that movement you can see until it go down. The colouring, they put some colouring too.

Q: It's incredibly labour intensive.

VP: Labour intense, but they gonna run. Once they get profit, they gonna run.

Q: What films would they have worked on?

VP: Oh lots, Superman. I got those drawing. Everything, those cartoons on TV, the old animation thing there.

Q: Is the energy you applied to the protests in the Philippines something that you apply here now?

VP: Philippines is different, it's rough. It's rough there. There's a police presence and there's harassment and beating up, shooting. Here it's all peaceful rally. I can't believe that people are so peaceful here. That's why it's safe to go on a rally here. In my country you know when to run sometimes. When you go to a rally, make sure that you're wearing your running shoes.

Q: Do you have children?

VP: I have only one daughter.

Q: What kind of future do you want for her here?

VP: Just keep our education public like that. It's her future. That's the only gift that we can give to our children. Even my mom tell me, oh I cannot give you any inheritance, we cannot inherit anything. But your knowledge, that's our gift to you. You will use it until you die. That's the only gift that my mom told me. They work hard, they work really hard to make me finish my college degree. They sell anything they can sell just to pay for the private school thing, the private school. Because if you go public, you cannot get a job or get anything. You will be just a worker.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

VP: Support the public school, that's all I want right now. My kid is still going to school. If once they gonna charge high tuition fee increase, oh I don't think I gonna put my daughter into school anymore. That's the only gift I can give to her. I always support her to be good in her class. If we cannot afford tuition fee as an ordinary custodian, how can we afford to go to college? How can she afford, how can I? It's hard. One thing, raise the minimum wage so all the workers will benefit from it. Wage increase, that's the issue. The wage increase in my country, once there is an inflation wage increase go up all the time just to make the workers to keep their ends meet. They raise the minimum wage so everybody will survive. We are all survivors there.



Minimum wage increase is important, especially for young workers. You cannot afford expensive school, you have to work. If you are receiving a small minimum wage increase while you were studying, you cannot afford it anymore, until you just become an undergraduate working class citizen. Where is the future? Underclass, low paid, working citizen. Make the minimum wage increase so the student can go to school and study and finish their career that they want. It's all connected – minimum wage, salary of the young workers. It's all connected, how to develop them into a good Canadian citizen. That's my idea about why I want minimum wage increase. It's for the young workers, not for me anymore. I'm on the middle of the wage, I'm okay. But the young worker who will be starting will be working too hard to get the certain amount so they can afford to go to school. Even my daughter right now was saying, dad, when can I work? She's 16. Oh, not yet. I'm still alive, I'm still working, I can still afford it. Sooner or later, I told her, she gonna look for a job once I'm old and my wife is old and cannot work anymore. That's the time for her turn. That's why make the minimum wage increase for the young workers, not for the old workers like us – for the young workers, for the students. It's not for us, because we are above the minimum wage because, like me, I've been working for ten years already. A little bit for the young workers, to give them a good start to experience how to work, how to earn money. How to earn good money while you're studying, not to work hard without earning good money while you were studying.

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