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## The Federation of Free Farmers

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# The Federation of Free Farmers

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JEREMIAS U. MONTEMAYOR

**T**HE farmer is the most important person in the Philippines today, for, apart from his essential function, he is also the most numerous. Three out of four Filipinos are farmers. They are therefore the base of the pyramid, the foundation of the economic structure.

Strangely enough, the farmer is also the most neglected person in the country. We have strengthened the apex of the pyramid with every invention of modern progress, but have allowed the base to decay. So that, while our city buildings are now provided with such modern facilities as elevators and air-conditioning, and our movie houses are now showing three-dimensional films, our barrio farms are still in the condition they were in when Magellan first saw the Islands in 1521—in the condition of the nipa hut, the carabao, and the wooden plow.

More than that, our economy is anomalous: mansions in the city, nipa huts in the country. The tables of the wealthy groaning with food, the farmers (who produce the food) eating nothing but rice and salt.

This poverty of the great masses of people cannot but affect the economy of the entire country. The poor cannot pay taxes, nor can they buy many goods from the stores. Now, government runs on taxes and business runs on sales. Therefore it is to the advantage of both government and business to raise the farmer from his poverty.

Moreover, because the farmer is poor, less and less people want to become (or to remain) farmers: no one wants to remain poor. Hence people leave the farms and flock to the cities. The result is overcrowding, unemployment, crime, dissidence.

It was when we almost forgot the farmer that the terrible monster of Communism appeared in this country. The monster is ugly, but it is intelligent: and it has the intelligence to realize that the surest way to conquer this country is to win over the peasant. And so the monster went about bare-foot with the farmers, attended their cock-fights, chewed betel-nut with them, told them the landlord's wealth was theirs for the seizing, spat red on the ground with them, while the lovers of freedom threw beer bottles at each other in the bars or hurled insults at each other in Congress or played poker through the night. And we were surprised to realize suddenly that the peasant had turned Communist overnight. Citizens were ambushed on the highways, army camps raided, crops burned and towns plundered.

The root of all this is in the fact that the farmer is poor and must of necessity remain poor unless things change.

### *Tenancy*

Since time immemorial, the farmer has been merely a tenant and has had to look up to another—a landlord—as his master. His livelihood depends on the land which belongs to the landlord. The tenant not only tills the land: certain services for the landlord's house have been taken for granted. His children work as servants in the landlord's house. He himself has to scrub floors and fetch water for the landlord at town fiestas. He is expected to bring chicken for the landlord's table, and he has to enter the landlord's house by the kitchen door. But when the landlord goes to the tenant's house, he must be entertained in the best manner possible and provided with the best meal that can be obtained. Somehow the tenant has accepted this situation, and if nothing occurred to disturb him might continue to accept it.

But things do occur. There is, first of all, the fact that his children are growing up and he cannot properly provide for them. Then there is the fact that he himself is growing old, and he cannot understand why, despite a lifetime of work, he has nothing to show for it. Indeed, after every harvest, he finds himself deeper and deeper in debt. Then there is the agitator who talks of land for all, and a world without landlords and without oppression.

Finally, there are the politicians who come to the farmer at election time, patting him on the back, making big promises which are seldom fulfilled, and disappearing after the elections—to return again when the next elections come around. Meantime the lands become more and more barren, the roads dustier and muddier, the sanitary inspector or the other municipal or provincial or national officials become less and less approachable.

In view of all this, what can the farmer do to improve his lot or to protect his rights? He is at a disadvantage in almost every thing—except numbers. And herein lies his hope. Fifty million men, working one by one, cannot lift a house: but fifty men working in unison have often lifted houses in the barrios and transported them from place to place. There are fourteen million farmers in the Philippines. Properly organized, nothing could withstand their strength.

### *Need For Organization*

A farmers' association can serve many purposes. It could be a weapon of common defense against exploitation by landlord or government official. It could also serve as a bridge between government and people. It could serve as an instrument for agrarian peace. It could serve as a means for economic advancement of the farmers themselves. Finally, it could serve as a voice to protect the farmers' interest in governmental action. A word about each of these points.

#### 1. WEAPON OF COMMON DEFENSE

When a farmer is exploited by a landlord, or a creditor, or by anyone else, theoretically he has many ways of redress. He

can complain to the landlord himself, or to government officials or agencies, or he can go to court. Practically, however, none of these ways is open to the farmer. He cannot complain to the landlord because he is only an ignorant peasant who can easily be outtalked or intimidated by a wealthy, cultured, influential landlord. Moreover, he can be thrown off the farm.

Nor is redress always obtainable from government agencies. An official comes to town. The chances are, the landlord gets to know about it, while the barrio farmers do not. The official lives on the landlord's hospitality, or is entertained by him. The landlord has been educated in the best schools here or abroad, the peasant is quite often illiterate. Even assuming that the tenant makes an impression on government officials, these officials can, as a rule, merely explain to the tenant his rights; they cannot fight for those rights. For instance, if a tenant's rights have been transgressed, he can go to court. But no one else can file the case for him—except perhaps the Public Defender, and there is one Public Defender for more than one hundred thousand citizens.

So it seems that little redress is to be had from the landlord or the government. Nor is there much hope from the courts. The farmer does not always know his rights, nor can he afford the best lawyers, and the backlog of the courts is notorious.

But if there were a farmers' association, it could inform him of his rights, give him legal advice, hire good lawyers for him, provide him with proper backing in his negotiations with landlord or government officials.

## 2. A BRIDGE BETWEEN FARMER AND GOVERNMENT

The government has much information to give to the people. This information is not always available to the farmers in the barrios. But an association of farmers could make this information available.

Again, numerous government projects, intended to help the masses, never get beyond the bigger towns or the main high-

ways. For instance, have the people of Barrio Sta. Cruz a Maragul, Porac, Pampanga; or of barrio Sta. Juliana, Capas, Tarlac; or of barrio Bacnit, Mabini, Pangasinan, ever heard of the PRISCO? Yet it is the people in these barrios, more than those in the cities, who most need the help of PRISCO. Now, a good farmers' association could bring the benefits of PRISCO to the people of these barrios.

Let us take an actual, concrete case. The National Development Company (NADECO) is a government corporation, which aims (among other things) to develop industries among the people. One day, an official of the Federation of Free Farmers went to the office of the NADECO to inquire what, in general, the NADECO had to offer to the farmers, and to ask, in particular, for samples of NADECO products which might be sold to the farmers. For one entire morning, the FFF representative sat and waited at the NADECO office without getting either information or sample. Subsequently, the FFF official wrote an article in the "We, the People" column of the *Times*. It appeared about ten days later. The day after the publication of the article, the manager of the NADECO published in the same column a flimsy explanation and invited the FFF official to go back to his office. When the FFF official went back to the NADECO office, he was treated like a prince.

Now, barrio people cannot afford to come to the city and spend entire mornings fruitlessly in offices waiting for information. The barrio farmer cannot write articles for the papers. An association that can do these things for him is his only hope.

### 3. INSTRUMENT FOR AGRARIAN PEACE

An association should not be conceived as necessarily a belligerent weapon. It can be a potent instrument for peace. Let us say that within a certain area there are a hundred landlords and a thousand tenants. Once the tenants become aware of their rights, hundreds of tenancy cases could develop which it would take years for the courts to dispose of. But if the tenants were organized, their complaints and grievances could be compiled and classified and taken up with the landlords.

If the landlords could be similarly organized, the tenants' association could deal on equal terms with the landlords' association, and many complaints could be disposed of and future grievances prevented.

#### 4. ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT OF FARMERS

Moreover, a farmers' association could bring about the economic advancement of the farmers themselves. For instance, one tenant could not afford to buy a tractor, but ten or thirty tenants banded together could. One barrio farmer could not run a large store, but many barrio farmers could run such a store as a cooperative project.

#### 5. A VOICE FOR THE MAJORITY

Though three out of four Filipinos are farmers, and small farmers, yet it is the small farmers who have the least voice in government. Few laws have been passed for their benefit, and those passed are largely ineffective. The NARIC has, until very recently at least, been a failure, and credit is not yet really available to the barrio people. The ACCFA law recently passed has yet to be tested. There is no effective representation of the barrio farmers in the executive branch of the government, or in Congress, or the NARRA, or the RFC.

### *The Federation of Free Farmers*

Taking advantage of the vacuum of leadership created among the farmers of Central Luzon by the death, capture, or retreat of Huk leaders in 1953, Fernando Esguerra and myself organized the Federation of Free Farmers. I first conceived the idea while helping the tenants of Bisocol, a barrio of Alaminos, Pangasinan. I organized them into the first unit of the FFF. Subsequently, leaders from Central Luzon came to Mr. Esguerra and myself, and thus actual organization of the farmers on a national scale began. We invited the Rev. Pacifico A. Ortiz, S.J. to be our Spiritual Adviser. He consented immediately. A manifesto was issued to the farmers of several provinces on October 25, 1953, and on that same day, the Feast

of Christ the King, the members of the National Executive Council took their oath of office.

Today, some two years later, the membership of the Federation has grown to about twenty thousand. They are scattered in the provinces of Pampanga, Tarlac, Bulacan, Pangasinan, Nueva Ecija, Laguna, Quezon, Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur, Ilocos Sur, Iloilo, and Davao. If the present rate of increase in membership continues, it is calculated that in another year the Federation will have some fifty thousand members.

### *What Has the Federation Done?*

We believe that even in such a short time our record of achievements can command respect. We might summarize these achievements under the following heads: 1) Enforcement of tenancy rights; 2) Promotion of agrarian peace by forestalling disputes or settling them; 3) Making the government conscious of the needs of the people, or obtaining action or redress where needed; 4) Spread of information among the farmers; 5) Co-operatives. Let us give concrete examples of some of the above.

#### THE CASE OF BARRIO PLARIDEL

Sometime in October 1954, some 250 farmers of Barrio Plaridel, town of Basud, Camarines Norte, asked the help of the Federation in securing patents for their landholdings in that barrio. The people had been cultivating the land for several years and for several years had asked local officials for the expediting of the reclassification and survey of their holdings and the issuance of patents. But until last year the people had not been able to get their titles and they had always felt insecure in their landholdings. The problem lay in petty politics.

When this case was brought to the attention of the national officials of the Federation of Free Farmers they went to the land involved and investigated the case. Then they reported the problem to President Magsaysay. Having been appraised of the problem, President Magsaysay, together with the FFF representatives and high-ranking government officials, went to Barrio Plaridel. Then and there President Magsaysay declared that he was going to issue the patents to the actual occupants.



## THE IRRIGATION PROJECT AT SITIO PAED

Then there is the case of the irrigation project in the Sitio of Paed, Barrio Alos, Alaminos, Pangasinan. For several years in the past the irrigation system in Paed had been operating, benefiting several sitios, but its operation had always been uncertain: first, because initially the dam consisted merely of earthworks; and second, because every time it was improved with government aid it was done in a haphazard manner, insufficient amounts being released immediately before or after every election. Hence, the dam had always been washed away during the first floods of the rainy season. In recent years, the system had not been in operation. The harvest of the people had been miserable.

The Federation of Free Farmers submitted a memorandum on the case to President Magsaysay. With characteristic dispatch, the President directed the immediate release of the entire amount needed for the construction of a permanent dam. Right now work is being done on the project and the people's faith in the government has been restored.

## THE CASE OF ESTRELLA DURAN

Then there is the case of Estrella Duran, a two-year old daughter of a Free Farmer, whose right leg was undergoing atrophy due to dislocation of the pelvic joint. Because her parents were extremely poor they turned for help to the officials of the Federation of Free Farmers. The Federation wrote a request for free hospitalization to the President of the Philippines. Now the child is on the way to recovery.

## DISTRIBUTION OF RELIEF

In the past the Filipinos have been given relief goods by the people of other countries, especially the United States of America. We know that these goods have come in great quantities, but the flow was often stopped by the hand of greed and graft in the big cities and towns, and eventually these goods found their way to the black market. But in February 1955, the barrio farmers received directly relief goods in big quanti-

ties with no questions asked, and with no strings, political or otherwise, attached. This was done through the FFF.

### INFLUENCING CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

The Federation of Free Farmers has a political action department which scrutinizes the bills proposed in Congress. If any bill is prejudicial to the interests of the farmer, the FFF officials exert the necessary pressure on the legislators. On the other hand, the FFF gives its support to any bill that will give justice to the farmers or promote their welfare.

Because of the insistence of the Federation of Free Farmers, many legislators have paid greater deference to the views and the interests of tenants and small farmers in the Philippines. During the public hearings of the bill that was later passed as the new Agricultural Tenancy Law, the Federation officials took active part in discussing the merits and demerits of the bill. In fact, the law itself as passed contains many features which were brought out for the first time in the Master Contract of Concepción, Tarlac.

### THE MASTER CONTRACT OF CONCEPCIÓN

Let us take a closer look at that Master Contract of Concepción, Tarlac.

We believe that one of the chief objectives of the FFF should be not only to settle disputes which have already arisen, but to *prevent* them from arising at all. Only thus can we have agrarian peace. We believe we have achieved this (though at great cost) in Concepción.

During the first days of March 1953, the Federation of Free Farmers sent out its local leaders to organize the tenants in the barrios of that town. Barrio locals were organized and on March 10 the barrio people invited the National Officials of the FFF to a town meeting in the población. On that day Fernando Esguerra, Eduardo Tiangco, and Atty. Nicanor Vergara (executive vice-president, 2nd vice-president, and treasurer, respectively, of the FFF) went to address the farmers at a meeting scheduled in the población. But before the meet-

ing actually started, the mayor of Concepción addressed the tenants. The tenants numbered about 700. In his address the mayor attacked the Federation and its leaders. The three FFF national officials walked out of the meeting. About 600 of the tenants walked out with them. Irritated by the walkout, the mayor ordered his policemen to arrest Fernando Esguerra. The FFF officials protested while the farmers gathered around them. Eduardo Tiangco went to a nearby army outpost to ask for help. The situation got so tense that when the armored car dispatched from the army outpost arrived, the townspeople, anticipating shooting and bloodshed, began closing the doors and windows of their houses. As the armored car approached, the tenants were at first afraid, thinking that it would be used against them. But when they saw Eduardo Tiangco on top of the car they shouted with joy and were quite overcome by the realization that the armed forces came out to the rescue of downtrodden people like them. Accompanied by the armored car and soldiers, the tenants and FFF officials walked to barrio Santiago some three kilometers away and there they continued their meeting in peace.

A few days later, "Ding Macbalen," an association of most of the landlords in Concepción, impressed by the unity of the tenants and reacting quite differently from the town mayor, invited the officials of the FFF to a conference before Judge Jesús Barrera, then Undersecretary of Justice. The purpose of the conference was to thresh out the tenancy problems existing in the town and to take measures to prevent the recurrence of such problems. It was decided that representatives of "Ding Macbalen" and of the FFF, with the unofficial intervention and assistance of Judge Barrera and Atty. Fernando Santiago of the Department of Justice, should formulate a master contract to govern tenancy relations between the tenants and the landlords of Concepción.

After nine conferences of tedious but patient discussion covering a period of about two months, the master contract was finally finished. Formal signing was done in Manila on May 14, 1954.

The contract affected about 150 landlords and about 2,500 tenants working approximately 8,000 hectares of land. It was the first of its kind in the history of landlord-tenant relations in the Philippines, and has been hailed in many quarters as setting the pattern for landlords and tenants in all other towns in the country to follow or improve upon.

As a direct result of the master contract, numerous tenancy cases pending in the Court of Industrial Relations relating to lands in Concepción were settled and dismissed. Considering the amount of money and energy which the government has to spend on a single tenancy case, the savings made possible for the government by an arrangement like the Concepción Contract are incalculable.

The Concepción Master Tenancy Contract has reduced agrarian unrest in this otherwise very troublesome region to almost nil. The landlord-tenant conflicts that have arisen in spite of the master contract are sporadic in nature and almost all of them have been, or are being, threshed out amicably between the representatives of the FFF and those of "Ding Macbalen."

Meanwhile, preliminary conferences between FFF officials and local landlords have been held to formulate separate master tenancy contracts in two municipalities of Pampanga, namely Magalang and Candaba. It is hoped that in the years to come the master tenancy contract will play a great role in promoting agrarian peace in many other towns of the Philippines.

#### INFORMING THE PEOPLE

The Federation of Free Farmers has undertaken numerous projects to disseminate useful information among the barrio farmers. In its early days the FFF translated the Minimum Wage Law into Tagalog and Pampango and distributed copies to the members of the Federation. Likewise the FFF simplified the Old Tenancy Law for its tenant members. Then it reprinted hundreds of copies of a publication about *tilapia* fish culture. Lately, with aid granted by the President of the Philippines,

the Federation undertook a major project of translating the New Agricultural Tenancy Law into the different dialects. It has printed 50,000 copies in Tagalog, 20,000 in Ilocano and 10,000 in Pampango.

Immediate translation plans of the Federation call for: simplification and translation into the vernacular of the Papal Encyclicals on Labor, the Philippine Constitution, pamphlets on the Margate system of rice production, and the Land Tenure Bill.

Among the problems that face the Federation, especially during its present stage of rapid expansion, is the dearth of competent leaders. Hence, the Federation has decided to establish an Agrarian Labor School to train prospective leaders in organizing the small tenants and farmers in the barrios, to acquaint them with the rights of the tenants under the Tenancy Law, and to familiarize them with the process of crop-liquidation, with the latest methods of increasing agricultural production, with cooperatives, etc.

The Federation has also endeavored to educate the people through concrete demonstration. In the early part of 1953 the Federation brought a team of experts from the Bureau of Soil Conservation to survey and analyze the soil in Bisocol. A map of the area was drawn, soil samples were taken and analyzed, fertilizer requirements given, and recommendations for the proper use of the land made. The recommendations on fertilizers were applied to a portion of the land. After the first year the crop was more than doubled. Similar projects are presently being undertaken by the FFF in other towns.

A significant project of the Federation in the educational field is the publication of a barrio newspaper. The need for such a paper is obvious. The English newspapers do not reach the barrios. On the other hand, the one or two vernacular newspapers that reach some barrio people contain almost exclusively matter for entertainment and little useful information that would really help the farmers in a practical manner. Sometime in 1954 a plan to add a vernacular section to the *Sentinel* and to popularize that paper among the barrio people

was broached by the FFF to some members of the Catholic Hierarchy and the Asia Foundation. Although the idea was well received in principle, no concrete help and material cooperation was given to the Free Farmers, and so the Free Farmers decided to put out a barrio newspaper by themselves. Upon suggestion of Rev. Fr. Pacifico A. Ortiz, S.J., the paper was named *Solidaridad*. The first issue came out in May 1954 in three dialects: Tagalog, Pampango, and Ilocano. Since then, it has come out at irregular intervals. For, although the Asia Foundation has donated sufficient newsprint, yet the FFF has not found enough financial resources for editorial and printing expenses. As for the circulation, there would not be a great problem in this regard because the organizational mechanism of the Federation will be an adequate vehicle for distribution.

Communists, with characteristic cleverness, have long ago realized the importance of a barrio newspaper. They publish *Titis*, which, although not printed but merely mimeographed, exercises considerable influence, for it is the only paper that reaches the barrio masses who have nothing else to read and who have nothing else to believe in.

Another project which the Federation has been undertaking is the compilation of information regarding government agencies which have to do with the farmers and their work. There is a section of the Federation that goes around to the different government agencies like the Bureau of Soil Conservation, the Bureau of Agricultural Extension, the PRISCO, the CIR, the PNB, the NADECO, the NARRA, Congress, etc., and compiles information as to what these agencies can do for the farmers and what the farmers can do for them. This information is simplified and published in the vernacular and distributed to the farmers in the barrios.

#### FORMING COOPERATIVES

On January 17, 1955, the Federation of Free Farmers inaugurated its first farmers' cooperative store in the town of Alaminos, Pangasinan.

In this connection, it might be interesting to record a personal observation. I observed that when the farmer leaders urged me to put up such a store, there was much confidence and optimism. But as the discussion became more and more concrete and specific, and as shares were actually to be bought, the confidence and resolution of the farmers decreased somewhat. So, to strengthen their resolution I said that the National Office would put up as its share the sum of P250, the farmers to put up their share to make the sum of P650 as initial capital. This capital was very small indeed and the store was correspondingly small. The store was set up in the business district of the población. The small stand where the store was located was constructed through personal labor and materials donated by the members of the cooperative. After some months of operation, the store was expanded, and stands a good chance to succeed.

The store deals in general merchandise for ordinary consumption, and such specifically farming materials as plowshares, barbed wire, gardening and farm equipment. In turn, the farmers sell some of their goods through the store, like rice or baskets and other non-perishable products. In the store is also a bulletin board where goods and animals for sale are posted, as well as the names of prospective buyers, for the benefit of farmers living in the different distant barrios.

The store which also includes space for the local office, has become a meeting center of the Free Farmers. When the farmers or their wives and children come to town they come to the store to make their purchases. At the same time they get a copy of their newspaper from the office. In the office too they read recent announcements, get pamphlets, see pictures of their organization, pay their dues, and get their share of relief goods, if such are being distributed.

Indeed the importance of the office-store has become greater and greater everyday. And as the farmers meet each other in the store, ideas are exchanged. Some farmers have thought of starting cottage industries of their own, the products to be sold in the store. Others have thought of requesting the pro-

per government agencies to give or demonstrate vaccination of chicken and other domestic animals, chemicals to control pest, prevention of common diseases and similar things.

Presently, the FFF has four cooperative stores: Alaminos and Sta. Barbara, Pangasinan; Candon, Ilocos Sur; and Bacacay, Albay. They have recently proved to be very useful in the distribution of NARIC rice and fertilizer to the farmers.

In an ordinary town in the Philippines there are about 2,000 barrio farmers. An average share of ₱5.00 from every farmer would mean a capital of ₱10,000, sufficient for a town cooperative store. Since most of the consumers are the barrio farmers themselves, the store is assured of general patronage. The only other vital requisite is continued honesty in the management of the store.

In this way, there will be no need for the huge financial outlays usually undertaken by our government in promoting movements among the people—huge outlays which often drain the government treasury and end up in uncollected debts, pilfered equipment, wasted salaries of incompetent or superfluous personnel. In this new way capital will come from the people themselves. And only in this way will we be able to solve the problem of alien control of our retail trade.

### *The Paramount Objective*

The Federation of Free Farmers has in view a paramount objective in order to solve the problems of the Filipino farmer from the roots. It is to give every farmer, or at least the great majority of farmers, a family-size farm of such area and fertility as will provide him and his family a decent livelihood. As far as the leaders of the FFF can see, this objective can be accomplished in either or both of two ways: (a) by the settlement of public agricultural lands; (b) by the expropriation and subdivision of landed estates. But can either of these be really pursued in such a manner as to benefit the poor farmers and to relieve our present problems? Under present conditions, it would seem to be almost impossible. Most of the high



officials in our government, congressmen and senators, members of the boards of directors of government corporations, other government officials who have a say in the formulation of policies, are landowners, hacenderos, people belonging to the moneyed class or the professions, and not to the poorer strata of our population. So that, although in principle the government may decide on the settlement of public agricultural lands, the officials entrusted with the implementation of such a policy could exploit their positions to further their selfish interests to the neglect of the people they are supposed to serve. This has been shown repeatedly in the past.

As for the expropriation and subdivision of landed estates, how can we expect this to be really brought about when most of our high government officials are owners, or are supported by the owners, of such big landed estates?

There is only one way by which the settlement of public agricultural lands or the expropriation and subdivision of landed estates may be carried out in a manner really beneficial to the tenants and the small farmers; and that is, by revolution. We mean *democratic, peaceful revolution*.

The tenants and small farmers in the Philippines, once united and organized, could wield overwhelming political power to plan and apply such reforms in our economic, social and political life as will really promote the well-being and the interests of the majority of our people.

This is a big aim. Many will obstruct it, perhaps with unconscionable means. But the movement is inevitable, and if we who believe in democracy will not lead this movement, the Communists will—with disastrous consequences.