

JUAN C. TAN:
“A Man of God, A Man for Others”¹

Juan “Johnny” C. Tan² blasted into the Philippine labor scene when the country lay in ruins in the aftermath of the Second World War. Tan, with his mentor and Jesuit priest Fr. Walter Hogan, emblazoned a vision as idealistic and as radical as only they could conceive it. They organized the Federation of Free Workers (FFW) on June 19, 1950, and the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) a few years later. The groups’ slogan articulated a desire to be free in more ways than one. Indeed, it cried for freedom that meant independence “from communism, from cheaters, from capitalist control, from politics and politicians, and from government control.”

FFW presented itself as an alternative labor group based on Christian social doctrine. It was a bold, fresh move from a non-partisan social reformer.

Now pushing 82 years old, Tan speaks a bit slow and moves a little uncomfortably after suffering a stroke a few years back. He has gone through a lot in the movement. But despite the hardships, he shows no trace of regret nor bitterness. In fact, he exudes a peaceful, calm, and renewed confidence that stems from a distinct satisfaction, even fulfillment, from his involvement in Philippine labor organizing.

As a young man in the 1940s, Tan taught catechism in public schools while he was at the Ateneo de Manila High School, where he graduated valedictorian. He met a lot of poor people who had shovels for homes and only the barest necessities to keep their bodies and souls together. He saw how poverty often stripped human beings of their fundamental dignity. Born in the image and likeness of the God who made heaven and earth, how could so many people live in dire want? It was a thought that nagged his mind.

After graduating from the Ateneo with an Associate in Arts degree in 1941, Tan’s fellow classmates pursued their own careers, making money or a name for themselves. Tan, on the other hand, sought answers to the prevailing socio-economic conditions. With mentor Fr. Hogan and a few other Ateneans, they established the Institute of Social Order (ISO) in 1946, and continue to exert efforts to help workers and other marginalized sectors. Ka Johnny was the Institute’s first Secretary. He was 25 and highly motivated to make a difference.

He recalls, “We were young and idealistic then. We wanted to change the world. Ateneo trained us to become men for others. We had a good mentor in Fr. Hogan.

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² Awardee of the Presidential Order of the Golden Heart, 2005

Nakita naming hirap ang mga mangagagawa, gipit sila. Inaapi ng mga_employers. Maraming union racketeers, lalo na sa pier, sa waterfront. Gustong kontrolin ng mga politiko at gobyerno ang Kilusan. Napakaaktibo din ang mga komunista ng panahong iyon.” (We saw how workers suffered. They were exploited by their employers. Union racketeers were many, especially in the piers, the waterfront. Politicians and government wanted to control the movement. The communists were also extremely active at that time.)

At the Institute, the objective was to advise people about good labor-management relations as outlined in the Papal encyclicals, notably “*Rerum Novarum*”. But as the group went about their work, they soon realized that dispensing advice was not enough. They had to place themselves in the front line of labor organizing. Since there were few unions then and the farm workers were largely unorganized, forming a labor union provided the immediate solution. At the ISO, Tan was besieged by workers who desperately wanted a better share in the company’s profit, as well as in other matters relating to their welfare and future in the company. This gave rise to the FFW (Federation of Free Workers) and FFF (Federation of Free Farmers).

It is ironic that even with their youth and their zeal in organizing unions and influencing the movement with their Christian principles, Tan and his group were tagged as communists. They also earned the ire of the church when they assisted strikers at the University of Santo Tomas. At this time, their mentor Fr. Hogan was exiled.

But the FFF and FFW kept expanding their membership, its range of activities, and intensity and commitment to the cause. Indeed, the FFW espoused an ideology of trade unionism based on the tenets of Christianity and democracy. Tan articulates, Communism as an ideology is anti-democratic. The Communists want to foist a dictatorship, what they call ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat.’ The Communist Party claims to be the vanguard of the proletariat. And in their name, the Party wants to install a dictatorship. Any dictatorship is a dictatorship. It is not democratic. And then again, their means are often violent and tricky and they are very good in organizing as also they have superb command organizations. It is as though their ends justify the means they use. So they kill people and assassinate leaders. We do not agree. So despite our friendship with their sincere leaders then, we had to part ways. We organized differently and offered another alternative to workers.”

As President of FFW in 1950 until he suffered a stroke in 1998, Tan was known for his no-nonsense leadership and untainted record. He was a fearless, hands-on manager. His reputation as a labor leader is one of high esteem; he is a giant in terms of his perspicacity and sensitivity towards issues and events affecting the welfare of workers in the movement. Ramon J. Jabar, current President of FFW, confirms: “People in the government, in the International Labor Organization (ILO) and other international groups consider him an eminent international figure in the labor movement.”

In the 50s, Tan participated in the Fulbright Educational Exchange Programme, and successfully completed an observation and consultation tour in the United States.

From 1956 to the present time, he has been a member of the Philippine delegation to the annual sessions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Conference in Geneva, Switzerland.

Ka Johnny's prestigious posts include Secretary-General of the Brotherhood of Asian Trade Unionists (BATU) (1963-1974), an Asian affiliate of the World Confederation of Labor (WCL) to which the FFW is affiliated. He served as BATU President from 1974 to the present time. From 1981 to 1989, he was the President of the WCL, being the only Filipino far thus far to hold such a prestigious post.

The World Confederation of Labour is mostly made up of labor unions in the Third World and in Europe, where the influence of Christian Democrats is pervasive.

Tan laments the weak and fragmented state of the Philippine labor movement. He cites various reasons.

First, "union raiding." In certification elections, so many unions can compete to be certified as the exclusive bargaining agent, which develops rivalries between labor organizations. He continues, "Then again, the predominance of plant-based unions and the absence of viable middle-level workers' organizations such as industry unions, craft unions or guilds would tend to make rivalries more intense. There is a need to restructure the labor movement towards broader modes of unionism and worker representation."

Another factor is the culture of unionism. Tan maintains that many big unions have become family-run businesses. "Leadership is handed down from father to son, much like our political culture. This kind of organization would tend to be less professional in character, which encourages splits and fragmentation. It is hard to build unity in the movement on the basis of family interests. It is also why, as a matter of policy, none of my children are involved in our federation."

Should there be instances when his labor leaders fall short of integrity or are found guilty of selling out their members by conniving with employers by way of agreeing to management's proposal, Tan declares that these types of leaders are expelled from the federation.

Yet another reason Tan cites is "personality-centered leadership." Tan argues that "when the union leader dies, the union dies with the leader or it causes a split whenever another member aspires for the leadership."

So what could contribute to strengthening the movement? Tan suggests a mouthful: "Good governance even of unions is necessary to develop the strength of the movement. Two elements are necessary: democracy and transparency. In the first instance, the participation of workers in the affairs of the union should be encouraged. The membership must feel that they own the union and its plans. They can do this both through direct participation or through the representatives or leaders that they elect democratically to lead them. In the second instance, transparency in the operations of

unions should prevail over the opaqueness of family organizations. In this manner, the members of the union are encouraged to participate in union affairs and to make their union strong and more permanent.”

In addition, Tan observes that Philippine unions still have to develop or evolve a “mass character”, i.e., having a membership that draws from all types of workers: rural and urban, formal and informal, young and old, men and women, physically fit or disabled. With this mass character, strength results from numbers, recalling the old adage, “In unity there is strength.” In other words, “Unions will have to return to their roots as a social movement that incorporates all types of workers in the struggle for better living and working conditions,” Tan asserts.

The political will to unify should be continuously developed. Of course, this will not happen overnight. Tan comments that political will could happen through “accretion, little by little as well as in leaps and bounds. Unity on issues now. Unity of professional, occupational interests next. Then, unity based on principles. Lastly, structural unity can follow as the need arises. This process builds confidence. And a unity based on confidence will be longer-lasting than one built on convenience.”

Tan sums up his sentiments on the need to build unity based on “pluralism, respect of dignity, tolerance of differences and sharing of burdens and resources.”

Tan fiercely opposes subcontracting labor, since it is similar to the “cabo” system in the waterfront, a system his federation opposed in his early years in the movement. The “cabo” or the leader had near absolute power over the workers since he did the hiring. He dictated how the workers would vote and how much wages they would get. The “cabo” also collected money from the workers and called them “union dues”. Tan, without mincing words, points out, “It is no coincidence that the richest labor leaders and their unions, then as now, hail from the waterfront. Subcontracting, similarly, takes responsibilities off the shoulders of employers. Companies want subcontracting to avoid paying higher wages as well as the responsibility to answer for the working conditions.”

Thus, in no uncertain terms, Tan declares, “We should prohibit systems that contractualize all types of labor, unless it is the nature of the work. *Halimbawa mga karpintero na gumagawa ng bahay. Kung matapos ang bahay, di tapos na ang trabaho nila.*” (For example, carpenters who build houses. When the house is built, then their work ends.)

He further declares, “Workers need to work to live. They have the right to work and to have a decent life. Contractual employment derogates that right and does not allow them to earn enough to live a decent life. Workers are human beings. And profits are only profits but it develops a strong compulsion for the profiteers to treat workers inhumanly. So, in the end, the human dignity of the worker and the employer are also compromised in the name of profit.”

The FFW strongly stands for a tripartite approach to labor problems, involving cooperation of the three social partners: labor, management, and government. Like other labor groups, they hold as sacred the right of workers to organize themselves and to bargain for better conditions of work.

And as for the right to strike, ever the cool, rational leader, Tan expounds, “I have always told our members that the right to strike, while it is a right, should be exercised with care and should be used as a last resort. *Hindi lang naman kasi interes ng unyon ang* (It is not only the interest of the union that is) at stake. *May mga pamilya ang mga myembro* (Members have families) who will suffer as a result. *Pero matitigas ang ulo ng mga lider at kumpanya na rin. Kung minsan, dahil lang sa amor propio ng dalawang panig, kaya nagkaka-strike.*” (But the leaders and employers are hard-headed sometimes. Once in a while amor propio of both leads to strike)

Tan goes further to say that strikes can teach a lesson to both workers and management. He cites the example of the union in Warner Lambert, a pharmaceutical firm. “In the sixties and during martial law, the union went on strike several times. Both sides learned they both lost during strikes. They realized that negotiations and dialogue could save them a lot of trouble. Since the last strike in 1975, most of their disputes have been settled at the plant level, or where they could not settle at the plant level, they made use of voluntary arbitration to settle the case, which they eventually settled amicably.”

In determining wages, Tan admits he is an idealist on this matter. He advocates for minimum wages that are uniform all throughout the country. But under the present system, there seems to be more than a hundred minimum wages. So he points out, “The system thus is not only liable to being violated, but it also has become complicated and therefore could hardly be enforced.”

Tan outlines his “one minimum wage” framework for the country as follows: “The minimum wage should be determined by negotiations by the social partners nationally, preferably approximating the living wage. Then, it should not be changed very often. The trouble with changing it so often is that it substitutes for collective bargaining at lower levels, which weakens the leverage of unions and also the system of collective bargaining, and unionism itself. If we have to adopt the minimum wages to regional variations or to industry, then let this be negotiated upwards by the parties at their level. This way we encourage collective bargaining and the formation of middle-level workers’ organizations, while we keep the minimum wage standard for all.”

What about the impact of globalization, liberalization, deregulation and privatization on work? Certainly, there are both good and ill effects. Ka Johnny offers valuable insight: “Our pace of opening up to the international market is even faster than our competitors, thinking we can get the benefits of liberalization earlier. The problem is that these policies have been installed at times when the whole Asian region suffered financial crisis in 1997, and the effects of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in the U.S. Going through these series of economic and political crises ultimately reaped us more problems than we intended to solve with these policies.”

Under certain conditions, liberalization, deregulation and privatization may work wonders. But Tan casts doubt on whether these would ultimately redound to a better life for Filipino workers. He remarks, “The other problem is that we are pursuing these policies quite blindly, without mitigating the pains of structural adjustment.”

Tan’s decades-long stewardship of the FFW, as well as the unwavering dedication to his work in the labor movement have not gone unnoticed. The most recent honor came from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in the Labor Day celebrations on May 1, 2004 at the World Trade Center in Pasay City. The “Order of the Golden Heart” was conferred upon him by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

On April 8, 1971, his alma mater, the Ateneo de Manila, paid tribute to its outstanding alumnus with the *Ozanam Award*. More recently, on March 24, 2000, the Ateneo awarded him the grand “*Lux in Domino*” (Light in the Lord) Award. Both awards have noted Ka Johnny’s remarkable commitment to the cause of labor unionism and spreading the gospel of Christian Democratic principles. While he is grateful for these accolades, Tan feels both humbled and ennobled.

In fact, it is this nobility of spirit which makes Ateneo’s products “men for others.” Tan pushed the frontiers of Christian education by directly upgrading the lives of oppressed workers.

Possibly as an indication of trust and admiration, President Fidel Ramos offered Tan the position of Secretary of Labor and Employment. But he declined the offer mainly because he did not want to be indebted to anyone. Outside of government, Tan retains his flexibility of action and independence. Besides, Tan claims “my temperament is not fit for a high position in government. I can do more for government and society by being outside government.”

The most Tan could accept was the chairmanship of the Social Security System (SSS) as representative of the workers from August 1994 to July 1998, and as Commissioner of the SSS from 1998 to date.

Since he is now President Emeritus of the FFW and considers himself retired, Tan luxuriates in the intimate warmth of his family: wife Dolores Buan, nine children and numerous grandchildren. The running joke is “now he realizes he has a family.”

Agnes, his eldest child, discloses what the rest of the Tan children felt about their father who was largely out of the house: “We know he was doing his work for his countrymen; in fact, he sacrificed a lot for them. But he always had a special time for us. If he was with us, he was really with us.” Agnes, married to a son of former Senator Lorenzo Tañada, used to teach Spanish at the International School in Makati. She, too, was involved with the school’s union.

The children understand the work of a father who assisted the lowliest worker and argued for him in court. Agnes proclaims, “Most of the time we felt proud of him. Mommy was always with us, and she was the disciplinarian.” When Ka Johnny was out in the fields with the workers, Mrs. Tan naturally harbored anxieties over the safety of her husband. She and her daughters recalled the time her husband was negotiating for a strike at the piers. They feared for Tan’s life, as they recalled some men who guarded their house on a 24-hour-basis.

Ka Johnny shares the belief that if one joins the labor movement, he should have no fear at all. “Your life is always on the line,” he attests. He recalls with mixed emotions the many lives risked by his members just to protect him. “Of course I have no qualms doing the same for them. I have also taken the risk. I was there with them.”

Tan says that his involvement in the movement has taken a toll on his health. His principles of integrity and commitment, on the other hand, have remained intact. If he were to live again, would he join the labor movement? He pauses for a while, and with a quizzical smile on his face replies, “Maybe. Maybe yes.”

Ka Johnny is a gourmet who loves Chinese food, especially *pancit* (noodles) which they ate even every day. The family dines out often, here and abroad. The children remember (the older siblings especially) that when their dad was in Geneva to attend the ILO conferences, he hies off to Chinese restaurants. “He knows all the Chinese restaurants there,” enthuses Agnes.

Almost every Sunday, the Tan household in Quezon City bursts into lively discussions or repartees — “kantiyawan” or “kainan.” Children bring their families and food to let their dad savor domestic bliss. The patriarch Tan is beside himself with inner glow. While he slowly joins his family in revelry, his eyes sparkle, content that his own children have appreciated his thankless job as a labor leader. Agnes reiterates, “We know our father was a labor leader, but somehow we thought it was normal that various kinds of people would come to our house asking for Dad’s help. One thing Dad taught all of us — to respect all who come to us, whether rich or poor. The workers have to be shown utmost respect, not to be looked down upon.”

During Christmas and New Year, the Tan family travels together. The grandchildren lend extra fun as they cajole and “make kulit” to their lolo.

Out of the depths of his compassionate heart and his sophisticated, sharp mind, Tan has succeeded to become a role model, a norm, a standard for responsible labor leaders.

The late Blas F. Ople paid tribute to Tan when he wrote in one of his articles, “He exemplifies integrity, intelligence and patriotism in labor leadership.” Larry Henares, a former high school classmate of Tan at the Ateneo, an entrepreneur and journalist, refers to Tan as “one of the best and the brightest.”

Tan's acerbic tongue used to be legendary. Then Secretary of Labor Ople referred to him as "the man with an acid tongue." Tony Asper, FFW Vice-President for Internal Affairs, concurs: "He makes a lot of enemies this way, because he is uncompromising about matters he holds deep. *Demokratikong mag-mura. Walang pinapatawad ang kanyang dila: pamilya, kasama, kaibigan, empleado, opisyal, mataas o mababa. May tama lahat.*" Lina P. Gonzales, longtime Administrative Officer of BATU, is quick to describe her boss as "*mabait at mabuting kaibigan pero masamang magalit, parang lintik.*"

Nevertheless, there is more from the President Emeritus of FFW than one would care to probe. That he is generous and ever ready to help people in need are rooted in his Christian education and exposure. As "a very meticulous person," Tony Asper and Lina P. Gonzales observe in their boss, they see someone who has an eye for detail, charting a course for the FFW and the labor movement in the Philippines.

Both have worked closely with Tan and assess him in this wise: "One gets to learn meaningfully by merely working with him. He gives you a lot of leeway to develop your own thoughts and character, so much so that a lot of rope is given you with which to hang yourself or with which to pursue your own dreams, whichever way you choose."

One senses here the democratic approach to leadership. No pressure but with a lot of responsibility – that is how he deals with his staff, and colleagues. Ramon Jabar concedes: "He gave the members of the FFW staff all the opportunities for advancement as leaders of the federation."

But one sure sign of the man's purity of heart is his humility. His people note this ability of Tan to admit and correct his own mistakes. Definitely, arrogance is alien to him. Say Asper and Gonzales: "*Hindi siya mayabang, in the sense na hindi nagbubuhay ng sariling bangko or hindi mapagmalaki.*"

This broad generosity of spirit inherent in Tan, unfortunately, has not always been taken positively. Jabar reveals, "He became a victim of treachery by some people in the FFW, to the extent that some leaders betrayed his faith and confidence in them through deceit by getting out of the FFW and organizing their own labor groups or labor organizations. In the process of instituting discipline in the staff, he was charged in the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC) for violating the rules and regulations of the FFW."

Juan Lorenzo Tañada, the eldest of Tan's grandchildren, comments that at first people may think his lolo is "*masungit* since he can be sarcastic at times. But, he explains that this is his lolo's way of being at ease with the person, or what in the vernacular is termed "*cariño brutal*". Asper and Gonzales view Tan "as a person who cares a lot. He doesn't often show it. One just feels it. And besides, he's very forgiving — to a fault."

The gracious lady of the family, Mrs. Dolores Tan, agrees that her husband can often be frank or sarcastic. “He does not lavish praises. If he feels one is doing good for the country, then he gives his tacit approval. But he doesn’t mince words when he wants to point out wrongdoings. *Sa kanya*, what comes first is the good of the country, *at kung sino ang gumagawa ng mabuti.*”

Mrs. Tan, reflecting on what constitutes her husband’s strength as an individual, says, “He is very loyal. He’ll stick his neck out for you, as long as this will not compromise his integrity. But if this particular friend or person fails his standards, or does something really, really wrong, he will show his disappointment by no longer talking to this person. And this period can take a long, long while.”

Mrs. Tan also observes that her husband does not ask favors from anyone, especially if it is intended for his family. “*Ayaw niya ng ganoon.* He refuses to compromise his principles as a labor leader. *Baka sabihin pa ng tao na* he accepts favors for his own selfish ends. Oh, no, not my husband,” she stresses.

“He has a soft spot for the underdog,” his wife and children point out. The moment the labor leader meets an aggrieved party, he rises to his/her defense. He will exhaust all available resources to reach out to the less privileged. Househelpers, teachers, sales clerks, messengers, and the like have in Tan an adroit and sincere lawyer-warrior in their behalf.

As a father, Tan’s children insist that their father plays no favorites among them. He plays fair and square, as he gives equal love and service to all of his nine children. He makes decisions in the house and for his family with the wisdom of Solomon.

Ramon Jabar maintains, “He has a heart that easily feels that a person needs his help or assistance. He considers people as loyal to him.” What pains Tan the most is when his very own wards or peers betray him. Mrs. Tan admits that betrayals or disloyalties severely affect her husband.

Bobby Tan, the eldest among the boys after five daughters, recalls that when his dad was younger, his father was “stern and very *masungit.*” Because of demands or pressures from work, he had a hard time expressing his soft side. True enough, “in his work as a labor leader, he is tough and determined and firm when he makes decisions because in this kind of environment, one has to be perceived as strong and tough-talking.”

As a father, Bobby Tan concedes, “Although his time was very limited for us, he provided us our needs, especially food since he loves food, it’s a trait that he has handed down to us. I enjoy it when we’re together, especially when we’re traveling. All his attention is on us.” He narrates an event which touched him deeply, when he was on retreat for what is called “Days with the Lord.” Bobby recalls, “My dad wrote me a letter wherein he said that a good father was someone who provided for the family’s needs.

Since dad didn't grow up having a father (he was orphaned quite early). He humbly confided that he didn't really know how to be a father. After this, my relationship with him became closer and warmer."

Like his sisters, Bobby feels grateful that their father trained them to be independent, "*Ganoon din ang buhay niya*—a battle for survival in the hostile world of union activities and other related events."

Mrs. Tan, admits, "My husband and I also fight, especially during the early years of his work with the movement. We had our differences, but this was due primarily because of his lifestyle as a labor organizer and founder. He was out of the house most of the time, and since his earnings were meager compared to what he would have received if he had joined the corporate world, I had to pitch in. I also took care of the needs of the children. I'm just happy all our children turned out well."

With very little cracks in his armor, Tan has a few indulgences. His regular visit every Sunday to a barber shop is a ritual he cannot forego. He takes pleasure in a soothing facial and feels good if he sports a new haircut or has gleaming, immaculately clean nails. There is also his passion for traveling which he does quite often, with his wife or with the entire family. But all told, the man lives simply, dresses simply and loves life simply. This labor leader, who may arguably be the most intelligent labor stalwart in the country, observes happenings in the bureaucracy with cautious optimism. He remarks, "Our country is not doing bad. We try to improve each time, learning from previous political indiscretions. We don't want to have another revolution because we have seen the abuses during Martial Law. We try to improve the situation little by little but not through violence."

With a brief look at the past political scenario, he claims that their group has helped form "a third force"—the Christian Socialist or Christian Democratic party, whose standard bearers were former Senator and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Raul Manglapus and former Senator Manuel Manahan. While this "third force" was not successful in its bid, Filipinos have at least been offered a fresh alternative.

What Tan suggests or actually aspires for, is that good Filipino men and women be elected to or hold positions in government. There is a need to have good politicians with integrity, maturity and commitment who will surely change the landscape of governance in the country. "We're getting there slowly," he mutters, as if in deep prayer.

As for the labor movement, with crisp determination he proclaims, "We will have changes in the next 10 years. *Nabubuksan na ang mga isipan ng mga employers.*"

A fearless forecast from one of the best and the brightest.