

Bringing the Black Flag to the Philippines

An Interview with Bandilang Itim

Bandilang Itim

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Proudly flying the black flag in the archipelago known as the Philippines are our next interviewees: Bandilang Itim. Aiming to be the banner that rallies together anarchists and libertarians in the region, this revolutionary anarchist publishing platform commits itself to producing original, well-informed content on local issues and events, and disseminating the writing and ideas of other anarchists and libertarians from the area and its diaspora. Be sure to check out their very professional pamphlets and zines, and follow them on Twitter to hear about their new events. In this interview, we ask their members what they wish to achieve, how they organise themselves, and how they deal with the struggles they face in the Philippines.

How did Bandilang Itim come to be?

Butingtaon: A group of friends reaching out to likeminded people, and deciding that anarchist philosophy isn't represented in its best form at the present.

Malagino: It was a group of like-minded friends and comrades that decided anarchism in the archipelago needed more eyes on it, especially since it's existed in PH for a long time.

Magsalin: Bandilang Itim came about as a project between friends who want to popularize anarchist and libertarian thought in this archipelago. Originally we had bigger plans to organize the atomized anarchists that exist into a larger organization, but we are still not on that stage. For now, we are an affinity group that maintains a publishing platform for which our milieu can use to initiate debate and dialogue.

Ponkan: People get the same idea and just do it.

What part do you hope to play in the anarchist movement?

Butingtaon: Help spread anarchist practices and philosophy in the archipelago, with a focus on wider social organizing (labor, gender struggles, ecology, etc).

Malagino: Basically, Bandilang Itim is a propaganda arm, a vibe, signal boosting the different issues and advocacies under the anti-authoritarian umbrella here and in SEA.

Magsalin: Perhaps speaking for myself, I hope that the publishing platform known as Bandilang Itim can be part of the embryo for the birth of a more involved anarchism in social and mass movements. To be clear, I have no pretensions on Bandilang Itim being *the* embryo of a future revolutionary movement. But I do hope our work can spark something greater than ourselves.

Anarchism in the Philippines is relatively new. While anarchist ideas like Malatesta's classical pamphlet *Between Peasants* arrived in the Philippines in the 1900s and sparked the founding of the first labor federation, for decades since anarchism was absent. To be sure, anarchy was likely present in various spaces where the state was not present like in distant and in indigenous communities and anarchistic and libertarian practices existed, but *anarchism* as a social movement would not be fully born until the 1990s from which the current anarchist milieu has its source.

Ponkan: As far as I know, BI is the loudest Filipino Anarchist group out there so its main focus is speaking up and offering an anarchist perspective on the local situation. We want to link like-minded people together and lay the groundwork for a more concrete libertarian movement in the islands for the modern day.

How are you organised as a group? Who or what bodies make the decisions?

Butingtaon: We're organized horizontally, of course. We determine goals collectively, divide it into tasks which are then picked up at the convenience of our individual members. Things that could potentially be divisive are not decided at once, if they are not urgent, and are instead allowed some time for a consensus to form. Things that require immediate actions are delegated to the member that we feel is best suited for the task.

Malagino: If I can share an anecdote we've had, while setting up our spaces for discussion, we've come to the conclusion that the video-sharing app we've been using allowed anyone to discuss their views and come to a decision without anyone having the authority to ban or mute someone easily. I could say it's the same with us.

Magsalin: We are an affinity group and so we have no need of specific bodies that make decisions like general assemblies, spokescouncils, or mandated delegations. If a thing needs deciding, we talk about it and mostly rely on consensus. Consensus is still an easy task as we are not numerous.

Ponkan: I don't consider ourselves organized, more collaborating. We act on our own initiative based on each other's insights and mutual intentions. It's a nice system.

What specific challenges do you face in the Philippines?

Butingtaon: Two, namely in the form of a general suppression of opposition politics by the Duterte regime, and the decades-old monopoly of the Maoist CPP-NPA-NDF on Filipino leftist politics.

Malagino: The Duterte regime is the biggest challenge. But there is also a big challenge concerning the other side of government, the opposition made up of liberals, CPP-NPA-NDF socialists that are largely okay with keeping the status quo, even at the detriment of many working class people.

Magsalin: The state is not yet aware of our organizing and we are careful to stay illegible to its gaze... for now. Should and when we scale up our organizing, I foresee inevitable conflict with both capital and the state. But for now (and as Malagino and Butingtaon have noted), our biggest challenge is the CPP-NPA-NDF or the Communist Party of the Philippines — New Peoples Army — National Democratic Front, or otherwise called the National Democrats or NatDems. NatDems are our homegrown Maoist movement. While they do good work in some places like in organizing proletarians and peasants, arming peasants and creating autonomous

zones, and organize strikes and the sort, we see them as ultimately limited by their hierarchical organization, nationalism, and class collaboration.

The hierarchical organization of the NatDems is a big turn off for us. The whole party line that treats individuals as objects, rather than subjects, in their politics leaves a bad taste in my mouth. From my perspective, it is as if politics is a thing done *to* the rank-and-file NatDems by the cadre, rather than people doing politics as full subjects in the fullness of their subjectivity. This politics done by the cadre with the rank-and-file as mere objects was most obvious in the bloody purges of the 80s and 90s which saw hundreds of committed communists and militants murdered by their own comrades in fits of collective paranoia. No one should have the power to murder their own comrades. This violence is not strictly internal. In the early 2000s, the cadre released a list of “counter-revolutionaries” from social democratic parties and rival revolutionary parties. The people on the list started to turn up very dead. It seems the Party is hostile to plurality and we cannot work with them.

Another issue we have with the NatDems is their nationalism and class collaboration. NatDems infamously backed “the first socialist president” Duterte in his campaign and in his early presidency. They were easily swayed by Duterte’s hypernationalist line. Duterte’s fascism was so obvious to us and many others but the official nationalist and patriotic line of the party blinds them to fascism and promotes class collaboration with other “patriots.” This class collaborationist line is not new and there have been multiple times before Duterte when they collaborated with a wing of the bourgeoisie. If you read their manifesto *Philippine Society and Revolution* it clearly spells out under what contexts the Maoist communist movement ought collaborate with so-called patriotic or national bourgeoisie. We have no such illusions with nationalism. While I understand why certain black anarchists see value in nationalism, our opposition to nationalism is very much informed by the experience of class collaboration.

Due to their highly capable level of organization, National Democracy and the Party enjoy a privileged position in the radical spaces in the archipelago, and it is hard to avoid them altogether. We are ready and willing to work with the non-NatDem left composed of social democrats and so-called Rejectionists (who are called so because they descended from groups within the party that rejected a reaffirmation of Maoism). But as we mentioned before, the Party is anti-pluralistic. We do not want to be purged or assassinated, so we must be careful in engaging with National Democracy.

Ponkan: The police killed an activist just this month and tried to cover it up. They also killed two civilians and claimed it was a drug bust. Our spaces of communication are under threat of being replaced by ones of surveillance. Our freedom and civil society is under threat.

The Philippines appears to lie at a crossroads between US and Chinese imperialism, what effect does this have on the area and how does this intersect with your anarchism?

Butingtaon: On a wider scale, it seems to our countryfolk that it's a choice between the Devil you know (the US) and the Devil you don't (China). While we support any anti-imperialist actions and want to promote a libertarian perspective on the matter, we are cautious to contribute to the anti-Chinese racist sentiment that is beginning to form in the country.

Malagino: Anti-imperialism, especially against the US, has been a sentiment in the country for a long time, but only now has anti-Chinese imperialism really become a rallying call for many people of the archipelago. We stand against all empires and we are trying to show it from a libertarian and anarchist perspective, which of course would include against anti-racism, since many people do not separate the actions of the PRC from the actions of Chinese peoples.

Magsalin: Imperialism is a world system. It is not simply a matter of PRC or USA imperializing this country, it is a matter for the imperialism of international capital. PRC and USA capital both operate and imperialize, as does so-called national capital, Singaporean capital, Japanese capital, and Australian capital. It is in this we see how imperialism is a world system. The specific offensives by the PRC military in the West Philippine Sea that encroaches on the spaces of the Philippine working class generates opposition between National Democracy and the PRC. On one hand, it is fortunate we do not have tankies that uncritically defend the PRC in the Philippines, on the other hand, the opposition of National Democracy to the PRC is predicated on patriotism as much as it predicated on anti-imperialism.

So where does that leave us? We join the chorus speaking out against both PRC and USA imperialism. We also take a principled and independent stance outside the ambit of National Democracy.

Ponkan: I wouldn't say crossroads, more like a sudden shift. The old elite are being sidestepped by the government in favor of pro-PRC stooges. Given the developments in Hong Kong and the passage of the Anti-Terror Law, the creeping influence is an immediate concern for sure. The discourse however is still choosing one or the other, so its a hurdle that must be taken care of.

How have your interactions been with local and state governments?

Butingtaon: In a project separate from Bandilang Itim, we found that local governments are more likely to be willing to work with individual or small-group initiatives more than the national government. We recently ceased said project because one of the provisions of the recent Anti-Terror Law is how mutual-aid projects that are not state-sanctioned could be deemed an "act of Terrorism".

Malagino: I can't answer this well, but I can say that the state doesn't like mutual aid outside of their own.

Magsalin: Our interaction with local and state governments have been mostly that of avoidance. We avoid them. Should we intervene in municipal issues, we will have more to tell about our interactions with local and state governments. Alas, we only started organizing this year and we don't have much to tell yet.

Ponkan: For now, anarchists don't matter to the cops or the government. We're just junkies to them. Keeping that perception will be crucial in the future.

How do you interact with your community/ies?

Butingtaon: We implement what is called "Concentric Circles of Involvement", first named in the FARJ's "Social Anarchism and Organization". It is a rubric for establishing spaces for connecting to people who support us but are not involved in the day-to-day affairs of BI, people who actively help reach our goals, etc. This means having several chat rooms, spaces and organizations with which to communicate with people within and outside our immediate affinity group.

Malagino: Concentric Circles of Involvement, as Butingtaon said. Especially in this pandemic season, safe digital spaces is what we need to carry this forward.

Magsalin: Some in our affinity group have organized mutual aid activities with communities. As we started just recently we don't have much to tell yet. Ask us again in a year or two. As Butingtaon noted, we do have a circle of sympathizers. It's an online community, of sorts. We are careful not to discuss organizing in these spaces, to prevent liability around the recent Anti-Terrorism Law, which can tag anyone as a terrorists. Yet should those sympathetic to our group wish to be more involved, we will be ready to welcome them.

Ponkan: We're all over the place and we don't want to give anything away, but to give an answer, we prefer working on areas where mutual aid is most needed.

What advice would you give to those looking to build a group like yours?

Butingtaon: Two things:

1. State clearly and early what the specific duties and projects the group will be doing, as to not be sidetracked into what Italian insurrectionary anarchist Bonanno calls "the logic of domination", where the growth and power of the group becomes the end-all, be-all of the group.
2. The program is direct action. Direct action is the program. Related to the first point, the group, even if it's just a pair of people, must do something, doesn't matter what, in order to get a response from whatever communities they are in. There will be people who will support that action, and it is in that group's best interests to reach out to those pockets of support, while keeping in mind operational security.

Malagino: All I can say personally is that there are many people out there who are disgruntled and angry about what's happening. We're all like cats. We're there, and yeah, we're hard to find and round up, but after you have enough cats you can scare any dog to an inch of its life. You just have to start rounding them up, and start preparing for that scare.

Magsalin: I would suggest finding a group of friends and enjoy the work you do. We are motivated by joy, rather than say out of patriotism or duty. If we do not enjoy what we do then perhaps it shouldn't be done. The birthing of a new world is a labor of joy. The contributions that our comrades put into this platform is through the enjoyment of it all. What use is liberation if it is boring and demanding? So demanding you have reified another authority in its stead?

Form affinity groups and reach out to other affinity groups (including ours!). Perhaps with a network of affinity groups we can build something wonderful.

Ponkan: Practice OPSEC. The world is burning right now and its governments are becoming desperate. Prepare for the worst.

Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not covered?

Butingtaon: I believe that's everything. Thank you for taking the time to hear our story, and I hope you and yours stay safe.

Malagino: That's all for me as well. Power to all of you. Thank you.

Magsalin: *On our name.* The name "Bandilang Itim" hearkens back to a long anarchist tradition of naming organizations after the black flag ("Bandilang Itim" means "Black Flag" in Tagalog). There have been countless organizations named "Black Flag" in all kinds of languages and until now there was not yet one in Tagalog, so it was a perfect name for our little project. Another reason I suggested "Bandilang Itim" as the name was to give a little homage to the student uprising several decades back in an event now infamously known as the Diliman Commune. The chief publication of the Diliman Commune was Bandilang Pula, or "Red Flag." Not only does it hearken back to the anarchist tradition of naming organizations "Black Flag," but it also hearkens back to radical youth during the days of the dictatorship.

Ponkan: Best to be Without Adjectives.

Many thanks to Samuel Clarke for writing the introduction and Jordan Lunness for editing the piece.

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