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The Filipino in the face of Disaster
February 2020

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On the afternoon of January 12 the Taal Volcano began spewing ash and smoke from its ancient caldera. Within hours a massive evacuation effort was launched to get people out of harm's way. A comrade was among the people fleeing the scene. Government offices and schools were understandably closed due to the disaster, but BPO centers around the areas most affected by the ensuing ashfall had the gall to call their workers back to work.

We've seen this story before:

A calamity or some other misfortune affects a large area of the nation and we get reports of people calling in to work being praised for "their dedication to their jobs" despite the obvious risks. The true story is most likely that they literally couldn't afford to be gone that shift. They might not get administrative sanctions or attendance memos for being absent, thought that still happens, but they still won't be paid for that workday. No work, no pay, right? But, this isn't to say that the supervisors and managers frantically calling their employees to work are bad people. This is bigger than any one person.

When you have someone who lives completely on what they make per hour worked, they have little choice but to show up for work. This is the greatest triumph of modern capitalism over the human spirit. I remember someone calling money “survival notes” because it literally does mean whether or not you survive in this society. Because we live inside it! It’s become a very efficient way for the rich business owner and investor to value profits over human lives.

With slavery, you own the person, end of discussion. In feudalism, you own the land, you get part of the produce of that land. But with capitalism? Oh, boy, you not only own the place where they work, you also own the places where they spend their hard-earned survival-notes at!

That’s how you get people to show up at work soaking in rainwater after braving the elements for two hours to get to a job that pays less than a hundred pesos an hour. That’s how you get people to stay to watch over what little property they have in the face of a raging volcano. That’s how you get people to value profit over human lives, most especially if that life is their own.

So no, it isn’t surprising that there’d be people who’d come to work on the apocalypse. Capitalism has made our world so absurd that it would actually make sense.

So here’s to the working-class heroes who instead of going to work went out to help in whatever way they could, even if it’s something as natural as getting your family to safety.