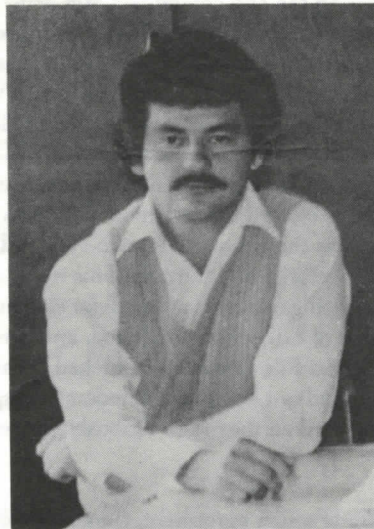


Statement by the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP) At the Memorial for Gene Viernes



Gene Viernes was only 29 years old when he was shot down in cold blood by hoodlum elements. He was from the working-class and displayed the finest revolutionary qualities of that class. He died as he had lived, a fighter for the rights of Filipinos and all workers. The violent political nature of his death, along with his comrade Silme Domingo, transforms them both into popular heroes to be remembered and emulated by all progressive forces in the Filipino community and the broader workers' movement. In striving to emulate and learn from the qualities of these two comrades, we recommit ourselves more firmly to advancing the people's movement and accomplishing the unfinished work they left behind. It is our firm intention to cement the revolutionary movement stronger with the blood of our slain comrades.

Gene Viernes was born into a large working-class family in Yakima, Washington, on August 16, 1951. He attended high school in Wapato and college at Yakima Valley and Central Washington State where he graduated in 1973.

Gene joined Local 37, ILWU in 1966 at the age of 14, and spent many summers as an "Alaskero," working in the Alaska salmon canneries along with his father and brothers. His experience with the sub-standard working and living conditions in the canneries and the blatant discrimination against Filipinos led Gene to demand improvements, first individually, and later to organize others to do likewise. Thus began his political education—directly out of his experiences as a worker and as a Filipino.

Gene's organizing efforts brought him together with Silme Domingo and others and led to the founding of the Alaska Cannery Workers' Association (ACWA) in 1972. The ACWA was a workers' legal advocacy group that filed class-action lawsuits against the major Alaska canneries charging social discrimination against Filipinos & Eskimos. For years the canneries had gotten away with shunting Filipinos & Native peoples off to the most back-breaking, lowest paying cannery work, while reserving the better skilled jobs exclusively for whites. The ACWA lawsuits were won in 1978, and represented a major step forward in improving the conditions of all workers, white and minority, in the industry, as well as opening up more skilled job categories to Filipinos and other minorities. The names of Viernes and Domingo became notorious to the capitalists and management who own and operate the Alaska fish industry — they were blacklisted, yet persisted in the struggle.

By 1978, Gene, Silme, and other progressives in the Union realized that the lawsuits were not enough, and the only on-going protection for the workers was a strong union. The Union itself needed to be reformed. While Local 37 had at one time been a progressive, militant, and democratic union, it had fallen into disrepair after the ousting of its progressive officers during the anti-communist McCarthy period of the early 1950's. Since then, backward practices such as bribery, corruption, vote-buying, intimidation, and violence had become widespread, fettering the ability of the union to defend the rights of its members against the industry. Gene, Silme, and other progressive union members saw that the union itself had to be built into a strong, fighting organization. They organized the Rank and File Committee in 1978 and elected several members to the Union Executive Board that year. In the 1980 Union elections, the Rank and File Committee's Reform Slate won a sweeping victory with a mandate to clean up and strengthen the Union. Gene was elected Dispatcher, Silme, Secretary-Treasurer, and many others were elected to the Union Executive Board.

One of the first areas needing reform was the Union's dispatch system. It needed to be re-established according to proper trade union principles of seniority and fairness. This was a difficult and dangerous task, as it brought the union into head-on collision with gangster and hoodlum elements within the Union, people who were bent on preserving the old corrupt system of bribery, intimidation, and favoritism.

Neither Gene nor Silme nor the Rank and File Committee flinched in taking up this difficult struggle, knowing full well the risks involved. They mapped out a fair and democratic dispatch procedure based on trade union principles and were implementing it when they were viciously gunned down by disgruntled lumpen elements.

While playing a leading role in the trade union movement, Gene, like Silme, was more than a trade union militant. He was a revolutionary with a hatred for injustice and oppression of all types. Gene joined the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP) in 1975 and worked tirelessly to organize and educate people to fight injustice. He played a leading role in building a progressive movement within the Seattle Filipino community through his activities in the Filipino People's Far West Convention and the Philippine National Day Celebration. He also took up the cause of the oppressed people of the Philippines by working actively in the movement against the U.S. backed Marcos dictatorship. In March of 1981, he went to the Philippines to examine first hand the harsh conditions borne by Filipino workers, and the repression of the trade union movement by the Marcos dictatorship. He carried back a request for support from the Filipino labor federation KMW to the ILWU International Convention in Honolulu. Gene and Silme were both instrumental in getting the ILWU convention to pass a resolution pledging to send an ILWU investigating team to the Philippines and to make a report back to the ILWU membership.

Gene Viernes' life, like that of his comrade Silme, was that of a revolutionary, characterized by commitment and struggle — commitment to advancing the progressive and revolutionary movement on every front. . . and struggle against the enemies of the people, whether they be hoodlum elements within the Union, the capitalists who control the Alaska canning industry, the U.S. Marcos dictatorship, or the whole system of capitalist exploitation.

The KDP calls upon all progressive and working people to draw strength from the lives of Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo, so that we may build a more powerful people's movement against injustice and exploitation, and carry on their work. We must turn our anguish into anger and direct it toward the enemies of progress so that the death of these comrades will serve to move us forward with even more determination than before. Gene and Silme's lives were cut short — but the injustice they fought and the cause they embraced lives on . . . it remains for us to pick up the heavy responsibilities and tasks that they shouldered and carry on!

Donations to the Gene Viernes Memorial Fund can be made to Barbara Viernes in care of Local 37, ILWU, 213 South Main, Seattle, WA 98104.