

cont. from pg. 1 [public utility] was sold to the multinational France Telecom in 1998, our government lost all of that revenue. Moreover, a direct correlation can be seen between the start of Telecom and the decline of services in this country (which in turn is used to justify more privatizations of services: electricity, education, health care, and water.)

Within a year of privatization, the number of workers employed by Telecom went from 7300 to 1800, and many of those fired (including myself) were union members. This was a very difficult period for the workers and the union, but we fought long and hard to re-establish ourselves as the private sector union SUTTEL in the year 2000. Nevertheless, the firings have continued, along with the pressure on the workers to work longer hours for less money.

As for the effects on consumers - they have been disastrous. The government spoke of ending the "monopoly of the state," but what they have created is a private monopoly, one that is not at all looking after the interests of the Salvadoran people. France Telecom has since been sold to Telmex, which is owned by the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, the richest man in Latin America. Does anyone think that he has the interests of poor Salvadorans in mind when making business decisions? Of course, prices have gone up, service has gotten worse in some rural areas, and in general regular phone service has become less accessible for those with limited resources.

Q: With CAFTA set to go into effect on January 1, how is the movement resisting the implementation process?

The social movement and the FMLN fought hard to prevent CAFTA from being ratified, but in the end ARENA used dirty tricks to pass it in the middle of the night without ever consulting the people. I imagine this sounds familiar, because the Bush Administration used the very same methods to get CAFTA passed in the US! There is no doubt that

CAFTA will devastate many Salvadorans, particularly those that live in the countryside, but we also recognize that the battle is not over. We can't simply lie down and let this unjust "treaty" run us over. The Salvadoran social movement is set to resist the implementation of CAFTA through various means: from legal challenges to street protests, to monitoring the effects with an eye towards challenging provisions of the CAFTA legislation down the line. Particularly we see future battles over privatization of water and health care as key aspects in the framework of resisting CAFTA.

Q: What can we do here in the US to continue supporting the movement? And what sort of message will you take home to those who continue the struggle in El Salvador?

Throughout the CISPES tour we've been talking about "globalizing the struggle," about breaking down borders, about mutual solidarity between countries. To some these sound like catch phrases, but I truly believe that there is a lot of work already being done towards making these ideas into a reality. In El Salvador, we are building new coalitions and alliances that stretch throughout Central America and Mexico and into areas of South America which include unions, consumer groups, campesino organizations and leftist political parties. These alliances include groups in the US as well, such as CISPES, and also coalitions, such as the Stop CAFTA Coalition, that continue to join together with the struggles in Latin America. I am impressed by the amount of activism and organizing I see in the US against unjust international agreements like CAFTA and the ILEA, and I know that the *compañeras* and *compañeros* in El Salvador will be heartened that movements pushing for alternatives are growing stronger in the US.

Finally, we need to put forward concrete alternatives, fair trade agreements where different sectors can voice their proposals for real development. ■

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One Year after Gilberto Soto's Murder, Government Continues to Deny Political Motives



This past November 5th marked the one year anniversary of Gilberto Soto's murder. Gilberto was a Salvadoran-American union leader and an FMLN activist, and last November he had gone to El Salvador to briefly visit his family before what were to be a series of meetings with Central American transportation workers. Soto had scheduled those meetings with workers in the same industry he organized in the U.S. - workers in the trucking industry who, like in the U.S., work under extremely difficult conditions set by powerful multinational corporations.

Twelve months after he was shot outside his family's home, nothing is near being resolved in the case. Despite political pressure from solidarity and union activists, the Teamsters, and even U.S. Congress people, the government investigators remain adamant in their refusal to investigate political motives for the crime. Instead, they have stuck with their flimsy story that Gilberto's mother-in-law hired hit men because of a supposed personal grudge. The government's reaction to Gilberto's murder has exposed the way in which the Salvadoran government - and particularly the repressive police force under Minister of the Interior Rene Figueroa - serves only the interests of a small, elite class in El Salvador while going to great lengths to repress, or cover up the repression carried out against, any opposition to the right wing agenda.

With no signs of justice in near sight, Gilberto's family is now working with a private investigator in El Salvador. This December 13th a hearing is scheduled in which a judge will decide whether or not there is enough evidence to keep the accused - Soto's mother-in-law and three supposed local gang members - in jail. Gilberto's brother, Francisco, sees this hearing as an important measuring stick for the courts, a moment to see whether they will work at all transparently to bring about justice in this case. CISPES, along with other social justice and union activists, will continue to pressure for a real investigation, for justice in this and other cases of crimes against activists, and for an end to the repression in El Salvador. ■

EL SALVADOR WATCH

EL SALVADOR Watch



Produced by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)

Number 113 Winter 2005/2006

The Next Threat: Water Privatization

The battle over water privatization is heating up in El Salvador, as the government has quietly finished preparing a series of new laws regulating the national water and sanitation system, and will be seeking Salvadoran National Assembly approval soon. The water laws introduce a new legal concept - that of concessions - and have been identified as an integral part of a packet of reforms needed to make way for the implementation of the US-Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA). Although DR-CAFTA was ratified by the National Assembly last year, the Salvadoran social movement is working to defend Salvadorans' right to water, and is demanding that the public water system remain public.

In El Salvador the privatization of public services began in earnest with the first Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA)



Protestor with water workers' union: "Water is not a commercial good."

administration in 1989. Originally pushed by international financial institutions to privatize public services - supposedly to reduce the country's public debt - ARENA has since then eagerly continued selling off several public utilities and services, such as telecommunications, pensions, and electrical distribution. The ratification of the new laws prepared by the ARENA administration - the "General Water Law" and the "Potable Water Sub-sector and Sanitation Law" - would allow for the privatization of water through concessions and deregulation. On one hand, the largest water systems would be administrated by private companies, and, on the other, the National Administration of Aqueducts and Sewers (ANDA) would be replaced by a new - weaker and less independent - entity, the Superintendence of Water.

In the same secretive manner that the ARENA-led government has prepared *continued on pg.2*

The Movement will Resist CAFTA and the ILEA: Interview with Salvadoran labor leader Wilfredo Berrios

Wilfredo Berrios joined CISPES for a month long, 10-city tour in November. Berrios was the long time Secretary General of ASTTEL, the telecommunications union in El Salvador, until the industry was privatized and many union leaders were fired in 1998. He continues to work closely with the restructured Telecom union SUTTEL, the leftist FMLN party, and with the militant Popular Social Bloc (BPS, El Salvador's largest social movement coalition). CISPES sat down with Berrios towards the end of his tour to talk in more detail about the situation in El Salvador and the struggles that he continues to help lead.

Q: Could you talk about the policies being promoted by the US government and international financial institutions in El Salvador?

For the last few years we have fought hard to stop the US-Central America Free Trade Agreement, but long before CAFTA was being negotiated we saw the negative impacts of free trade policies in our country, especially with privatization.

In terms of the labor sector, there have been incredible impacts, from mass firings of workers to the loss of social benefits like health care, to labor "flexibilization" which is

nothing more than forcing workers to work more hours for less pay, not recognizing overtime work, reducing the minimum wage, and other kinds of assaults on workers' rights.

Also, we have seen repressive anti-union activities by the government and private companies, from intimidating unionists and workers to creating parallel pro-company unions, to actual assassinations like that of Teamster leader Gilberto Soto in El Salvador earlier this year. And now we see the imposition of the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador, a new police training school that would be built and operated by the US government, and could lead to more experts - like the graduates of the School of the Americas - in methods for torture and repression.

Q: What have been the results of the privatization of the telecommunications sector specifically? What does "restructuring" mean for workers and consumers?

Revenue from public telecommunications was the single biggest source of income for the Salvadoran government, and those millions of dollars could be put towards health care and other social programs, especially if we are able to elect a leftist government. So when the ANTEL *continued on pg 4*

25 Years and the Struggle for Justice Continues

Two socially ardent entities united by the revolutionary struggle in El Salvador are celebrating their 25th anniversary this year: the FMLN and CISPES.

The Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation celebrated the anniversary of its founding this past October with an array of lively events, including the inauguration of a memorial monument and a presentation and video charting the 25 years of FMLN history. Of course music, youth, and a lot of dancing were all part of the celebration as well. During the main event, CISPES was one of 25 organizations and individuals that were privileged to be awarded a Farabundo Martí Medallion for our work and solidarity over the past quarter century. Our executive director, Burke Stansbury, was honored to receive the award on behalf of CISPES among leaders like Chavez, Castro and Ortega. Stansbury recalls being congratulated by Milton Mendez, the General Coordinator and historic leader of the FMLN: "CISPES is one of the few organizations that came out of the 80s that has remained strong, and with a revolutionary commitment to our struggle." Los Angeles CISPES coordinator

Don White and former executive director Cherrene Horazuk also received special diplomas for their longtime activism in support of the Salvadoran struggle.

Here in the U.S. we celebrated CISPES's 25 years of solidarity with committees holding anniversary events all over the country. The national celebration was then held in New York City on December 3rd with a big fundraiser dinner at the Brecht Forum and a bouncing after party. Highlights of the night were the revolutionary "saludos" from Milton Mendez and San Salvador mayoral candidate, Violeta Menjivar. Mendez was invited especially by CISPES for the occasion, and stressed the extraordinary value and importance of the relations we have built with the social movement in El Salvador. Another attraction was the collective presence of all former (and present) CISPES executive directors on stage. After the dinner mingling and the inspiring speeches, we headed over to a new location to enjoy live bands, various DJ's, and a lot of dancing! Most of all, we celebrated what brought us all together in the first place: our understanding and need for change, and the

passion and inspiration we have witnessed from the Salvadoran struggle in making the hope for a more just world a reality. After honoring the remarkable relationship of solidarity between the FMLN and CISPES at both events, we certainly hope to be celebrating for 25 more years to come. ■

Water, continued from pg.1...

these laws, it has been implementing a de-facto water privatization strategy of the smaller – and less profitable – water systems, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). In 2001, a \$43.7 million dollar IDB loan was re-directed for the repair of 60 rural municipalities' water systems that were damaged by that year's earthquakes. As a condition, the government agreed to "decentralize" the water systems, and ANDA has been encouraging communities to set up local water administration boards through a process marked with irregularities. Through an organizing campaign, the ANDA workers' union (SETA) has begun to fight against this process.

On the whole, CAFTA further forces governmental deregulation, opens the way for more foreign investment, and allows transnational corporations to enter into contracts with governments. Given the reality in El Salvador, where lack of potable drinking water is a serious problem (more than half of the population lacks access to water, especial-

ly in rural areas) and privatization's track record, passing water administration over to private hands is more than likely going to exacerbate the situation. As was the case with telecommunications and electricity distribution, companies – true to their profit-driven strategy – cherry-picked the most profitable markets and increased rates without investing in quality improvement or in increasing people's access.

SETA, the water workers' union, has been on an aggressive campaign to confront ANDA's "decentralization-privatization" strategy. SETA has identified 16 municipalities where ANDA is close to forming councils, and the union is contacting city councils and organizing joint forums with other organizations. These forums have served to discuss the water problem more in depth with the population, to raise public awareness and counter the government's misinformation campaign that presents decentralization as the solution to the national water shortage. "We are willing to fight to defend the interests of the Salvadoran people. With privatization, only those with money will have access to water. We are calling on the people so we can fight together against privatization," said Wilfredo Romero, SETA president. The FMLN and community organizations have also been part of the resistance to water privatization, combining tactics of education and awareness raising, street protest, and legislative opposition.

On the legislative front, the FMLN agrees that the country's water laws need to be reformed because they are unorganized and conflict with one another. However, the need for reform should not be used as a front for privatization. FMLN deputy, Roger Blandino Nerio, said "we need a General Water Law, but one that recognizes water as a fundamental human right and does not treat it as a commodity to be sold and bought for profit. Furthermore, water laws should establish universal coverage." Meanwhile, non-profit organizations like the Center for Consumer Defense (CDC) are demanding that the government make these laws public immediately and that it begin a process of public consultation.

Given the upcoming launching of CAFTA, tentatively scheduled for January 1, 2006, the ARENA administration is expected to try and push for the ratification of the new water laws soon. El Salvador has a history of combative struggle to defend public resources, such as the strike to defend the public health system which started in 1999. Public opposition to water privatization is strong, which is partly why the government has been so secretive about the new water laws. As the water privatization battle heats up, it is crucial to work in solidarity with Salvadorans and support their fight against privatization. ■

Elections Monitoring and Solidarity Delegation to El Salvador!

March 4-15, 2006

Join the CISPES delegation to observe critical mayoral and congressional elections as an accredited international observer

* Hear voices from the frontlines of the struggle against the implementation of CAFTA, about resistance to political repression and the ILEA and about alternative models of development based on **people's needs and not corporate profit** *

* Meet and strategize with **union organizers, women's organizations, and the FMLN** about building strong cross-border resistance.*

To apply, visit www.cispes.org or contact christine@cispes.org

Committee focus: Seattle

Seattle CISPES has had an eventful autumn, with more yet to come before the start of the new year. Amidst a period of transition in the local staff position, the Seattle committee hosted a series of successful events with Salvadoran labor leader Wilfredo Berríos, reached out to students throughout the Puget Sound region and is planning to celebrate its 25th anniversary with a soirée on December 10th.

Wilfredo Berríos' visit to Seattle spanned three days of events in and around Seattle. After a welcome dinner with local CISPES activists on the evening of November 6th, Berríos visited Skagit Valley College in Mt. Vernon, Washington on the 7th. There, he was interviewed on an hour-long Spanish language radio show that enjoys a popular following within Mt. Vernon's large immigrant population. In fact, one listener called in to talk to Wilfredo during the program and others arrived at the college to hear Wilfredo's presentation after hearing him speak on the radio.

The event with Berríos at Skagit Valley College was sponsored by the College's chapter of Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/Chicano de Aztlan (MECHA). This event proved to be an important opportunity for Seattle CISPES to connect with this passionate student group which advocates for the rights and advancement of the Chicano community in Mt. Vernon.

The main event of Berríos' visit to Seattle was a fundraising dinner on the night of Monday, November 7th. Held at the University Friends Center, the evening featured live music by local group Sin Fronteras, a traditional Salvadoran meal of pupusas, rice, beans and quesadillas and a presentation by

Berríos. With 60 guests in attendance, money was raised for CISPES' material aid docket through admission fees, donations and a raffle of Fair Trade Certified coffee from farmer-owned co-ops in El Salvador (coffee donated by Equal Exchange).

Before heading on to Missoula, Berríos gave yet another talk on Tuesday the 8th, this time at the University of Washington. Co-sponsors for this final tour event included UW Students for Fair Trade and the Student Labor Action Project, in addition to several academic departments at the University. Seattle CISPES is excited to have made connections and collaborated with active student groups in both Mt. Vernon and Seattle as a result of this year's CISPES national tour.

In addition to all of the above, this December 10th Seattle CISPES will be celebrating 25 years of solidarity; and will be honoring CISPES stalwart Dave Tatro, who stepped down from the local staff position in September after 8 years of dedicated leadership. The party will be a wonderful opportunity for all of Dave's friends and colleagues to toast and roast him! Dave plans to remain in Seattle and maintain his involvement in CISPES as an activist and volunteer.

Dave began this new volunteer phase of his involvement with CISPES by providing invaluable training and support to incoming staff person Cameron Herrington, a recent graduate of the University of Washington's Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, as he assumed the role of committee coordinator. Building upon the momentum of a successful fall, the Seattle committee, and its new coordinator, look forward to a strong 2006 – its 26th year of solidarity with the people of El Salvador. ■

From El Salvador to the US, Union Leader says NO to the new ILEA in San Salvador

At least 20,000 people gathered at Fort Benning, Georgia on Nov. 19-20 to demand the closure of the infamous School of the Americas, better known in Latin America and throughout the hemisphere as the "School of Assassins." CISPES made its presence felt with the participation of Salvadoran union leader Wilfredo Berríos, who was completing a 10 city tour of the U.S. In addition, a contingent of NY-CISPES activists caravanned to Georgia, as well as current and past CISPES activists from Washington, D.C. and other cities.

Berríos had the opportunity to meet with countless compañer@s that have been active in the struggle to close the school of torturers for decades; some of which included Vietnam War Veterans, religious leaders such as Roy Bourgeois, Salvadoran, Chicano/a and Latino/a students from California and Chicago, environmentalists, women's groups, war survivors from Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, Colombia, Argentina, among others. All these committed groups and individuals recall the death squad style repression and disappearances from the 1980's during the civil wars in the Americas as if they had happened yesterday.

CISPES, along with Voices from the Border and Nonviolence International, held an informational panel to talk about the specifics on the new US-funded ILEA (International Law Enforcement Academy) proposed to operate in San Salvador. At least 60 people attended this panel in which Berríos, Tanya Snyder and Andrés Thomas Conteris spoke about the real motives behind the ILEA. Although not all the details regarding the ILEA being built in San Salvador are out in the open, one of the main concerns is the potential for it to be a step toward professionalizing a corrupt police force and becoming a new mechanism to

teach repression. What was clear during the presentation was that U.S. military and police presence in El Salvador is growing at a time in which internal political repression is already on the rise.

The next day, Berríos stated as he spoke from the main stage: "Today we want to globalize our struggle and become one force of opposition not only to the SOA and the ILEA, but also to CAFTA and any other form of U.S. intervention. I bring a revolutionary message from the heart of the Americas (Central America)...a message from the land of the daughters and sons of Simón Bolívar, and from our revolutionaries Farabundo Martí and Mélida Anaya Montes. ■ **To act to stop to the ILEA, see CISPES's web site, www.cispes.org/ilea.**



Salvadoran social movement leader Wilfredo Berríos marches with CISPES & nearly 20,000 people at the protest to shut down the SOA.