

EL SALVADOR Watch

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Dangers Rising for Central American Migrants in Mexico

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rings, Mexican law enforcement and the failed US efforts to fight the “War on Drugs” in Mexico. Even before reaching the militarized and patrolled US-Mexico border wall, migrants face kidnapping, sexual assault, extortion and murder from those seeking to profit from this vulnerable transient population. Mexican authorities frequently take no action against the perpetrators, or worse, government authorities are implicated in human rights abuses against migrants .

The government of El Salvador, under the guidance of the country’s first leftist head of state Mauricio Funes along with the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional

Abuses and dangers for migrants crossing the Mexico-US border in search of economic opportunity are well-known. Far fewer people are aware of the dangers that migrants from Central and South America face on the way to the border – from organized crime



Migrants from Central America traveling through Mexico on a freight train

(FMLN) party have begun taking steps to create protections for migrants traveling through Mexico in search of the “American Dream”.

In a recent incident highlighting the terrible risk associated with the journey north, 50 Central American migrants were kidnapped in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca last

December. These migrants were taken from a freight train while attempting to traverse the country to the US border. Witnesses claim that the powerful “Los Zetas” drug cartel carried out the mass kidnapping. The migrants were reportedly being ransomed back to their families for \$10,000 dollars per person. This particular train had already been stopped by Mexican immigration authorities, raising questions about collusion between these authorities and the kidnapers.

Last August, another terrifying attack occurred when 72 Central American migrants were massacred in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas, which borders the US. A survivor of the massacre has alleged that these killings were also perpetrated by Los Zetas, after the migrants refused to pay or work for the cartel. To date, the Mexican government has not made any arrests in connection to the *continued on pg 4*

The New Republican Congress Threatens Latin America

by Alex Aquino

The ongoing economic crisis created an opening for the Tea Party movement, fueled by ignorance, xenophobia and major corporate sponsors, to propel the Republicans back in control of the House of Representatives during the November, 2010 mid-term elections. Given that the right-wing House’s first order of business was a symbolic vote to repeal Obama’s health care reform, it’s clear that further red-baiting and obstructionism is on its way, but will the new House leadership produce a tangible impact on foreign relations with Latin America?

Anti-imperialists note that the difference between Democrats and Republicans on Latin American policy is largely a matter of style, not substance. Up until last month, it was a Democrat-led Executive, Senate and House that has enabled

the coup perpetrators and human rights violators in Honduras to continue to escape justice. Two of the most vocal supporters of the illegitimate Honduras government have now taken over as chairs of the House committees dealing with Latin America.

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fl), one of the most notorious anti-Castro crusaders from Miami, is now the chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. An uncompromising promoter of multinational corporate interests, her first trip as chairwoman was to Haiti, where neoliberalism has wreaked untold disaster. The only optimism she expressed on her trip was for a new *maquila* park being built on the island’s north coast. Ros-Lehtinen also threatened to withhold the billions of dollars of earthquake aid that the US has promised (but has mostly failed to disperse one year later) if the Haitians did not certify the fraudulent elections that excluded- *continued on pg. 5*

Now Serving the *Pueblo*: The Salvadoran Institute for the Wellbeing of Teachers

by Hilary Goodfriend, *El Salvador Intern*

El Salvador is approaching its second year under FMLN executive governance. In this short time Salvadorans have seen significant gains in education, access to healthcare, the defense and promotion of women's rights and the fight against corruption. One inspiring example of positive transformations under the FMLN is that of the ISBM, *Instituto Salvadoreño de Bienestar Magesterial*, or the Salvadoran Institute for the Wellbeing of Teachers.

El Salvador's teachers have fought for many years for their own functional healthcare and pension system. For decades, teachers seeking healthcare faced medicine shortages, poor quality medical attention, and overall marginalization. Demands for such a system began in the 1960s, but were never realized until 2007 when the Legislative Assembly approved the creation of the ISBM, later constituted in 2008. After the 2009 victory of FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes, the Funes Administration appointed Professor Rafael Antonio Coto López - long-time FMLN leader and a teacher himself - as president of the ISBM. Under the new government and Coto's leadership, the institution has become the supportive, accessible healthcare network that Salvadoran

teachers have demanded.

Financed largely by contributions from members' salaries, ISBM provides family medicine, specialized medicine, dentistry, psychology, medicine

dispensaries, laboratories and hospitalization for teachers and their families, along with services like temporary disability pensions and even funeral costs. As of July 31, 2010, the ISBM had 85,292 users: 34,325 contributing teachers and 50,967 relatives of teachers who qualify for ISBM medical services.

In a recent presentation, Rafael Coto pointed out that unlike the public healthcare system, the ISBM provides pediatric care for the children of its contributors through the

age of 21, and in cases of disability the coverage continues beyond this age. The ISBM also provides prenatal care for pregnant minors whose parents are teachers. In addition, the institute pays its doctors more than the public does.

The institute continues to make significant gains in quality and coverage. Surgeries have tripled in the first year under new leadership, as have the number of people seeking care

in ISBM hospitals. The availability of medicines has increased 90%. As a result, more and more teachers are becoming contributors:

Coto reported that the ISBM has incorporated 24,000 new contributors in the last year.

He is particularly proud of the new recreation center for teachers and their families. In December 2009 the institute began remodeling the center, which had been closed and in disrepair. From April through December of 2009, the center registered about 7,000 users. In just the month of April 2010, when the center reopened, about 3,000 visitors came to the recreation center - and the flow of visitors keeps coming.

As part of broad government efforts towards transparency and anti-corruption, the ISBM issued an exhaustive 46-page summary of the institute's history, mission, services, budgetary distribution, and operations along with a 37-page report detailing the institute's work throughout its first year under the new administration. Every teacher in El Salvador received the summary of the ISBM activities under Coto's direction. Among the achievements cited are: increasing coverage of medical services, bringing mental health programs to a national level, and creating an ISBM website to inform users of services and activities on the national level.

The transformation of the ISBM provides exciting evidence of the gains being made under the government of the FMLN for the benefit of the people of El Salvador. We look forward to hearing more stories like these from our allies in the struggle for change in the years to come. ■



Families of teachers enjoy the remodeled recreation center



Youth perform marimba music at the second anniversary commemoration of the ISBM

Midwest Coalition against Lethal Mining forms to fight another lawsuit against El Salvador

Following on the heels of Canadian mining company Pacific Rim's lawsuit against the government of El Salvador, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin-based mining company, Commerce Group Corporation, has brought its own \$100 million suit. Commerce Group has been operating the San Sebastian gold mine in the eastern part of El Salvador on and off in for over 40 years. The Ministry of the Environment revoked their exploitation permit in 2006 due to environmental damage.



(Photo: Sister Cities)

Rust-colored river that runs through mine tailings

The community of Santa Rosa has been severely affected by the operations at the mine. A 2006 study by Italian environmental scientist Flaviano Bianchini found that the local river is 100,000 times more acidic than uncontaminated bodies nearby. The study also found levels of cyanide more than 10 times higher than the maximum allowed by the World

Health Organization. The community indirectly consumes this

water, used for washing clothes and dishes and to water crops and animals. Most of the community members no longer drink the water from the river and are forced to pay for water from uncontaminated wells; those who cannot afford clean water still drink from the polluted river.

In September 2007, the Center for Investment and

Commercial Research (CEICOM) presented a complaint to the Attorney General's office calling for an investigation into environmental damage caused by the mine. Though the Attorney General did conduct a study, it was of *different* metals than those identified in studies, and thus decided to take no action.

In June of 2009, Commerce Group filed a lawsuit against El Salvador demanding \$100 million dollars in compensation for lost profits, despite the fact that, according to their own reports to the Securities and Exchange Commission, the mine has not turned a profit since 1999. The investor protections of the US-Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) allow foreign companies to sue governments for profits or *potential* profits that are "indirectly expropriated," including by environmental regulation; NAFTA contains the same provisions. The case is being heard by a panel of corporate lawyers at the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), housed at the World Bank. Their decision may be kept private and there is no appeal.

A preliminary hearing was held on November 15th, 2010 in Washington, DC to decide whether or not to accept El Salvador's motion to dismiss the case. **Stay tuned at www.cispes.org for the upcoming decision.**

There has been a strong reaction against Commerce Group at home in Milwaukee, led by the Midwest Coalition Against Lethal Mining (MCALM), a coalition of Latin American solidarity organizations, environmental organizations, students, professors, and local churches, many of whom have built strong relationships with communities in El Salvador through sister parishes. In November, MCALM circulated a letter *continued on pg. 5*

Confronting US Militarism: Education and Strategy Conference April 8-10 in Washington, DC

Register at www.lasolidarity.org to attend an informative and exciting conference in Washington, DC from April 8-10 to build a larger movement to end US militarism and the militarization of US relations with Latin America.

Join Latin America solidarity activists, people of faith, academics, youth and students, anti-war and immigration activists, labor, women, and many sectors that are working to build a better world for a weekend of plenaries and workshops to educate and inspire each other and to **plan actions, strategies, and organizing tools** to build a greater movement to overcome US militarism.

The conference will be in conjunction with School of the Americas Watch's Days of Action, April 4-11! **Please call (202) 521-2510 for more information, to register, or to submit a workshop proposal.**



Crisis for migrants cont. from pg. 1

massacre.

The Los Zetas cartel is a startling consequence of the US regional “War on Drugs”. The cartel was founded by former Mexican military agents trained in counter-insurgency and anti-narcotrafficking at the School of Americas in Ft. Benning, Georgia. Today, the same kind of training and US-cooperation that gave Los Zetas an edge as a violent organized crime syndicate continues to flow through Mexico and Central America through the Mérida Initiative (“Plan Mexico”) – a \$1.3 billion dollar anti-narcotrafficking package paid for by US taxpayers to train and arm Mexico’s military and police. Latin America’s economic refugees are book-ended by failed US policies: the US-sponsored free trade agreements and neoliberal programs that exacerbate poverty and unemployment in their home countries and the violence spawned by the militarized US border and the terrifying consequences of the “War on Drugs.”

The numbers of kidnappings and other crimes against migrants are shocking: in 2009, Mexico’s Human Rights Commission estimated that nearly 10,000 undocumented immigrants had been kidnapped in the six months prior to February 2009. Women face particular danger on the journey; human rights groups estimate that up to 6 out of 10 females attempting to cross through Mexico are sexually assaulted.

Migrants in Mexico are reluctant to report their crimes for fear of detention or deportation due to a law that requires all foreign nationals to present evidence of legal status to federal, state and municipal authorities when requesting assistance, who are required by law to report undocumented persons to immigration authorities. The Mexican government does have a system of temporary visas for migrants who have witnessed or been victims of crime. However, few migrants are informed of this option and not all Mexican authorities adhere to it.

Human rights groups have further accused Mexican law enforcement bodies of participating in the violence and crimes against migrants, having been implicated in using excessive force, including the killing of three migrants when Chiapas state police opened fire on a truck carrying migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador and China in 2009. In this case, the migrants from Central America were immediately repatriated to their own countries, precluding their involvement in any criminal investigation against the police.

In response to the escalation of violence against migrants in Mexico, El Salvador’s FMLN party signed a cooperation agreement with Mexico’s two leftist political parties, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) and the Workers Party (PT). The agreement recognizes the ineffectiveness of the Mexican authorities to stem the violence and crime faced by migrants, and pledges future efforts to develop laws protecting the human rights of migrants in El Salvador and Mexico. Additionally, El Salvador’s legislative Foreign Affairs Commission is working on national legisla-

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tion to define concrete procedures and governmental bodies charged to protect undocumented migrants and their families. Legislators hope to pass the law before President Obama’s visit in March to send a clear signal that caring for migrants is the Assembly’s highest foreign policy priority.

-- By Kraig Cook, Seattle CISPES

Historic Change: The FMLN Assumes the Presidency of the Legislative Assembly

On February 1, 2011, FMLN Deputy Sigfrido Reyes, became the President of the Legislative Assembly. This is the first time that the Presidency of the Assembly has been held by the FMLN; manipulation by an alliance of the right-wing parties has prevented the FMLN from assuming its rightful leadership since 2003, when the FMLN first surpassed ARENA to win the largest percentage of votes.

Reyes dedicated his opening ceremony to “the great leaders of the emancipation of the Salvadoran people ... and all the compatriots that have dedicated their lives to the cause of democracy and social progress in El Salvador,” naming

Monseñor Romero and Anastasio Aquino, leader of the 1832 indigenous uprising, among them.

The President of the Legislative Assembly has a major influence on the agenda and priorities of the Assembly, including which laws are discussed and voted on. The highest priorities for the FMLN in the Legislative Assembly for 2011-2012 include laws to:

- 1) Regulate and reduce the price of medications. (El Salvador currently buys and sells medicine at the highest prices in the world, according to a 2008 study.)
- 2) Prioritize the common good and environmental sustainability in a national and local land development plan
- 3) Protect migrants and their families (*see article*)
- 4) Prohibit metallic mining and respond to climate change
- 5) Recognize the rights of Youth
- 6) Reduce violence in partnership with the municipalities.

The FMLN also plans to support policies to generate employment and to strengthen the electoral system, especially with regards to transparency and citizen participation. Other commitments of the Assembly’s first FMLN president are to create spaces for dialogue and collaboration and to generate more confidence in the legislature itself. The members of the FMLN are also celebrating “the end of an era” of favoritism and of an Assembly manipulated by the President, as it was for many years under ARENA. Reyes called for “wisdom to guide my steps in only one direction: to serve the people and my country with loyalty and truth, and to seek, from this house, which is the House of the People, the unity that our country needs to overcome any challenge and move forward.”



ed the most popular party in Haiti, Fanmi Lavalas, which brought Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power before the US-sponsored coup in 2004.

Connie Mack (R-Fl), one of the four hard-line Republicans who threatened to retaliate against El Salvador in the event of an FMLN victory on the eve on the 2009 Presidential Elections, predicting that “El Salvador likely would quickly become a satellite and proxy of Venezuela, Russia, and perhaps Iran” under the FMLN, is now the new chairman of the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. Ros-Lehtinen has promised to use her new position to move aggressively against the governments of Venezuela and Bolivia, but it is Rep. Mack that has taken the rhetoric to a whole new level.

At a far-right event organized by Otto Reich in November 2010 on Capitol Hill (“Danger in the Andes: Threats to Democracy, Human Rights, and Inter-American Security”), Mack pledged to try to place Venezuela on the state sponsors of terrorism list. Recently, Mack used his speech at the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in January to call for a “full-scale economic embargo” on Venezuela.

Ros-Lehtinen, Mack and their ilk are straining to connect the leftist governments of Latin America to some sort of conspiracy involving drug-trafficking and Islamist terrorist groups. Progressives’ first



Ileana Ros-Lehtinen consults with Honduras coup leader Michelleti

reaction to the right-wing hysteria may be to laugh, but as Honduras has proven, one should not underestimate the Obama administration’s willingness to concede their position to Ros-Lehtinen, Mack and other Cold Warriors. During the first Mack-chaired subcommittee hearing on February 15, Arturo Valenzuela, the top State Department diplomat for Latin America, promised to further investigate whether or not Venezuela was violating international sanctions with its energy agreements with Iran.

Investigative journalist Eva Golinger reports that the

threats go beyond rhetoric. According to Golinger, “For the first time in recent history, the [2011] Foreign Operations Budget (State Department) openly details direct funding of at least \$5 million to anti-Chavez groups in Venezuela... This type of funding has been a principal source of promoting subversion and destabilization in Venezuela against the democratic and majority-supported government of Hugo Chavez during the past eight years.”

It remains to be seen, however, how influential the new Congressional leadership’s saber-rattling against Venezuela and countries in the ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) alliance will be; a lot depends on the response of the solidarity movement; strong challenges from other

Representatives, and the degree of overlap with the State Department’s agenda. On policy toward President Chavez, whom Secretary of State Clinton has previously called a “thug,” there may be relatively few contradictions; on El Salvador, a more complex picture emerges.

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Despite the shameless hostility aimed at Venezuela, Haiti, Honduras and other leftist governments and movements in the hemisphere, present U.S. – El Salvador relations are extremely cordial. President Obama’s first trip to Latin America in March, during which he will visit only three countries – Brazil, Chile and El Salvador – is very significant, confirming that the U.S. is content

with direction of the Funes administration so far. El Salvador’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and long-time FMLN party member, Hugo Martinez, has stated that that the trip will “seal the strategic alliance” between El Salvador and the U.S.

Stay tuned for news and analysis of President Obama’s first visit to Central America and the implications of this ‘strategic alliance’ in the next issue of *El Salvador Watch*.

Commerce Group. cont. from pg. 3 signed by over 70 organizations, calling on Commerce Group to drop the lawsuit against El Salvador, clean up the pollution, provide compensation to the victims and respect the sovereignty of El Salvador. Representatives of the coalition presented this letter to Commerce Group in a face-to-face meeting at their headquarters in December. Dan Kasun of Milwaukee commented, “It appeared obvious that [Commerce Group’s comments] attempted to either minimize culpability or prove willfully ignorant of the obvious environmental and health impact of the Commerce Group’s mining operations.” In January, CISPES joined MCALM in launching its first Action Alert against Commerce Group, mobilizing people across the country to demand that they drop the lawsuit and get out of El Salvador. If you live in the Midwest and would like to join the coalition, please contact us at (202) 521-2510. Many thanks to our partners at U.S.-El Salvador Sister Cities for the background information presented here and for their leadership in this campaign!

CISPES Chapter Update: Santa Cruz

by Nidia Bautista, Santa Cruz CISPES & National Office intern

The University of California Santa Cruz is home to the newest CISPES chapter on the West Coast! Santa Cruz CISPES was formed at the start of the academic year by students from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, including some who attended the CISPES Radical Roots Delegation and Activist Summer Camp this past summer. Since September, students with different levels of experience with activism have regularly come together to discuss and strategize how to organize at UC Santa Cruz in a way that's aligned with the struggle for justice in El Salvador.

Our chapter has grown in numbers and commitment by hosting the *¡Viva La Resistencia!* speaking tour featuring Orlando Velasco, a community organizer with the Association of Friends of San Isidro, Cabañas (ASIC) in October. Mr. Velasco has stood with ASIC at the forefront of the struggle against Canadian mining company Pacific Rim's gold mining projects and represents ASIC in the National Roundtable Against Metallic Mining in El Salvador (La Mesa). Mr. Velasco spoke to us about the anti-mining struggle in El Salvador and the devastating effects of



Dedicated members of the newest CISPES chapter at UC Santa Cruz after a weekly meeting

free trade agreements like the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which allows foreign corporations to sue the government for upholding environmental regulations that "infringe" on their profit. He emphasized the importance of continued international solidarity and support for community organizations like ASIC. Many of the students who attended were impressed by Mr. Velasco's commitment to justice in Cabañas and have since increased their commitment to Santa Cruz CISPES!

We have been able to connect with other student organizations that feel passionate about social justice and feel connected to the struggle of the people of El Salvador. We have formed strong bonds with *La Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios* (USEU) and have shown solidarity by supporting events with organizers from the National People's Resistance Front (FRNP) of Honduras. As a sign of commitment to a true and participatory democracy

and economic justice in Central America, CISPES was there to discuss the golpe de estado that occurred in June 2009 and that the Honduran people are facing today. We have also developed connections with *Centro Americanos Unidos* (CAU), a student organization that focuses on Central America and its cultures, traditions, and issues. Much in the way CAU welcomes students from all backgrounds, we aim to create a broad network of members and supporters interested in learning more about transnational solidarity.

We have a unique opportunity to educate and mobilize enthusiastic undergraduate students to join the struggle in El Salvador. The majority of undergraduate students are eager to learn and want to get involved, as well as to develop connections between their academic studies and real-world struggles for justice. For example, one of our members focused on the anti-mining struggle for her human rights class and was able to translate the analysis and history from El Salvador into a media project accessible to all students!

Since this is our first year, we feel it is important to educate ourselves about the organization's history and the successes achieved by activists who came before us in the struggle against US imperialism, as well as to establish a solid understanding of the Salvadoran people's history of revolutionary struggle. In the upcoming months, we plan to host several Education Nights on the history of the Latin America solidarity movement and an anti-mining workshop to continue educating the broader community about the struggle in El Salvador and the international campaign to stop the mining companies' lawsuits against the Salvadoran government.

We are also excited to work together with the Salvadoran community and other organizations in the city of Santa Cruz to organize off-campus events with the broader community. We believe this would be a key role for us to play in creating a stronger solidarity movement in the Bay Area. This is an exciting time for Santa Cruz CISPES! *¡Siguiendo la lucha en solidaridad con el pueblo de El Salvador, CISPES presente!* ■

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