

# EL SALVADOR Watch

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## El pueblo que lucha triunfa! (The people who struggle will triumph!)

### *El Salvador Inaugurates its First Leftist Government*

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On June 1st, Mauricio Funes and Salvador Sánchez Cerén were sworn in as President and Vice President of El Salvador at the *Feria Internacional* Convention Center in San Salvador. It was a magical day for the Salvadoran people, social movement organizations,

and the leftist FMLN party which Funes and Sanchez Cerén represent.

Counted among the two thousand invited guests were many international delegations and heads of state, including presidents Correa of Ecuador, Lula of Brazil, Bachelet of Chile, Lugo of Paraguay, and Uribe of Colombia. Vice President Lazo of Cuba and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were also on hand, among other official government representatives. Notably absent were Presidents Chávez of Venezuela and Morales of Bolivia, who were unable to attend



CISPES members were on hand as 70,000 celebrated the inauguration of an FMLN president on June 1

due to last-minute concerns regarding their security.

In a powerful inaugural address, President Funes promised that the change the people asked for with the election of the FMLN “begins now” and is in the hands of the people, not just the individual will of the president. He

vowed to work with civil society to “create a new national project” based on social inclusion and guided by hope and optimism. Specific steps announced to confront El Salvador’s deep economic and social crisis include an employment program to build over 25,000 new houses, a central bank to guaran-

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## My political re-awakening

by Linda Joanna Salinas, Bay Area CISPES

Being part of CISPES’ March election observation delegation to El Salvador gave me new direction in my organizing and a new level of political *concienciatura* (consciousness). The Americas have been resisting colonization for over 500 years, and the recent changes are the fruits of this struggle. El Salvador is one of the areas that have had the blood fall from its people’s veins in the struggle against imperialism. The recent victory of the FMLN is due to the freedom fighters of the generations before that had faith in their *compañeros* to continue the fight.

A lot of the work to support the FMLN came from the social movements. As delegates, we saw them organizing themselves to inform other people to counter the right wing-controlled media and to denounce any fraud. They were the ones getting out the vote, but more importantly, protecting the vote of *el pueblo*. The movements that have been challenging the repression were the ones that got the FMLN into office and will carry

the responsibility to keep the new government accountable to the people. They know that the FMLN has a large and long battle in front of it. Though the party won 35 legislative seats and the presidency, this is only a piece of the constant struggle to slowly transform a country to be accountable to its people, rather than foreign investors. I heard many people say that the change will not come from the *asamblea* (Legislative Assembly), but from the grassroots.

Our delegation was able to meet with so many people that had so much heart, who do this work out of need, but more than anything out of love for the people. The Las Herosas workers are a perfect example of this. They decided to organize a union and have refused to take a deal in which only the leaders would be paid but not the rest of their *compañeras*. They believe either “we all eat, or none.” This was not an isolated story, but something that was seen in the many people we met that fought not just for themselves, but for each other. The people of El Salvador are continuing the fight of the generations before and fighting for the genera-

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# CISPES 2009 presidential elections analysis: A victory for the Salvadoran people and the U.S. solidarity movement

On Sunday, March 15, Salvadorans headed en masse to the polls to cast their ballots for their next president. By 9:30 p.m. Mauricio Funes, candidate of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), pronounced himself President-elect — the first leftist head of state in the country's history. The significance of this shift in power cannot be understated, considering it comes on the heels of 75 years of unbroken, brutally repressive right-wing rule, backed by decades of unflagging support from the White House.

Official tallies showed Funes of the FMLN edging out Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) candidate Rodrigo Ávila 51.3% to 48.7%. This slim margin is a testament to the heated electoral battle that raged in El Salvador for close to two years.

In spite of the smear campaign, fear-mongering and fraudulent votes whipped up by ARENA and backed by hard-line conservatives of the U.S. government, the right-wing could not take this election. This time, the FMLN and the U.S. solidarity movement had learned the dirty tricks employed in the 2004 Presidential election, and were well-organized and poised for action when ARENA and its U.S. allies tried to stack the deck again in 2009.

In the months leading up to the election, CISPES, SANA (the Salvadoran American National Association) and other solidarity groups spearheaded a grassroots Congressional campaign to stop U.S. intervention in the 2009 elections. In early March, these coalition efforts yielded a letter to President Obama, signed by 33 Congressional Democrats, calling for an official U.S. declaration of neutrality with respect to the Salvadoran presidential election. Less than a week later, House Republicans reverted to the interventionist scare tactics that succeeded in maintaining ARENA party rule in the 2004 presidential elections.

Just four days before the election, Congressional Republicans publicly defamed the FMLN and emphatically repeated the threats of the Bush administration: to cut off remittance monies to El Salvador and to end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of Salvadoran immigrants if the FMLN won on March 15. Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) warned, "If an ally of Al-Qaeda and Iran comes to power in El Salvador, the national security interests of the United States will require certain immigration restrictions and controls over the flow of the \$4 billion in annual remittances sent from the U.S. back home to El Salvador." Salvadoran mainstream media outlets dutifully provided extensive coverage of the Republicans' statements, printing their threats as front page news.



*CISPES delegates, including former executive director Angela Sanbrano, celebrate the FMLN victory with the pueblo on March 15*

This was a deliberate Republican effort to strip away the FMLN's popular support with only days remaining before the vote, after the formal close of the campaign period, thus leaving the FMLN legally unable to respond to these scathing attacks from Capitol Hill.

CISPES organizers and Democratic allies in Congress sprang into action. Calls from thousands of concerned U.S. citizens "flooded" (in their words) the State Department and U.S. Embassy, demanding a public statement of U.S. neutrality from the Obama administration. Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) and Representative Howard Berman (D-CA) weighed in on the fray, both publicly rejecting the Republicans' threats and reaffirming U.S. neutrality.

On Friday March 13 — two days before the presidential vote — the State Department and U.S. Embassy in San Salvador made unprecedented, formal declarations of neutrality, further promising to respect the result of the election and to work with whoever won the presidency. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon stated: "...this is a choice of

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the Salvadoran people that we will respect and we look forward to continuing our very positive relationship with El Salvador, and working with the next elected government." The news spread across El Salvador just in time for election day. Solidarity activists, invigorated by the success, settled down to wait out the election.

When election day arrived, voters and poll workers were so anxious to get started that some voting centers opened before the official 7:00 a.m. start time. International observers noted that many polling places were a "sea of red," with voters sporting FMLN colors.

Election day itself was a relatively smooth operation. Nonetheless, *continued on pg. 6*

# Fired sweatshop workers continue struggle in El Salvador's new political era

by Sara Wallace-Keeshan

As an intern at the CISPES office in San Salvador working to support free and fair elections earlier this year, I was extremely inspired by the struggle of the former workers of the Las Hermosas clothing factory. These women are waging a powerful, four year-long fight to hold multinational corporations like Adidas, Nike, and Russell accountable for exploitative labor practices that culminated in the illegal shut-down of their factory. I was also excited to learn that the election of leftist president Mauricio Funes could play a role in finally bringing justice to the Las Hermosas workers.

On Thursday, May 7th, CISPES joined workers from the Las Hermosas factory as they reiterated their demands for workplace justice to Adidas and the Salvadoran government at an afternoon



Estella Ramírez, former worker at the Las Hermosas factory, speaks to a CISPES delegation in March

press conference. Workers denounced the recent effects of right-wing trade agreements, like the Free Trade Agreement CAFTA, that allow corporations to easily withdraw production from unionized factories. Additionally, workers emphasized Adidas' responsibility to fully compensate the workers over \$825,000 in unpaid severance, salaries, health care, overtime, and back pay. While workers expressed hope that the newly elected Funes government would hold multinational corporations accountable, lead organizer Estella Ramírez called on solidarity activists to organize at an international level, stating "We don't expect a lot of these things to be solved right away."

As a student labor rights activist, I became involved in the Las Hermosas workers' international campaign and participated in a 2006 delegation to strengthen students' solidarity relationships with the Las Hermosas women. One year after the closure of Las Hermosas, I asked Estella a simple question: Why, given that the big brands still haven't complied with your demands, are you still fighting? Why haven't you given up?

Confidently, Estella turned to me and said: "We're not giving up because our fight is a statement that multinational corporations cannot continue entering our country and exploiting our people."

The struggle of the workers at the predominately female Las Hermosas factory began in 2003, when workers first reported abusive conditions ranging from consistent sexual harassment and verbal and physical abuse to forced overtime. Estella remembers "the manager did not pay into social security, so workers could not receive health care from the public hospital and pregnant women couldn't receive health care." Despite the fourteen hour days, and increased illnesses, the women began to "talk about how we could change things."

Fed up with poor working conditions, a group of 64 women

workers joined together with the Frente Sindical Salvadoreño (FSS), a national labor federation, and organized to form a union, bringing demands for back pay, severance and overtime to the Ministry of Labor. Upon receiving the demands, the Ministry gave the company one month to pay the workers.

Rather than complying with the government's decision, the company made plans to avoid paying the workers by moving production to a completely different factory in another part of El Salvador.

The Las Hermosas workers had a different plan. On the day the factory was set to close, over a dozen workers faced down private security officers, blockaded the factory door, and took control of the building. Estella recounts, "We acted so quickly; we took control of the locks and said to the women, 'come and unite, this man is trying to close the factory without

complying with the Ministry of Labor's agreement.'" Estella and other key organizers pulled more women into the protest, forcing the managers to lock themselves in the factory office. Determined to stay until they received pay, workers occupied the factory for a month, until the Ministry of Labor ordered them back to work at the risk of serving jail time.

The factory takeover was just the beginning. For the following five months, the women took to the streets, participated in international speaking tours, and joined students in the U.S. to pressure companies and the Salvadoran government to comply with Salvadoran labor law. Despite international pressure, the brands have ignored these laws, refusing to compensate the Las Hermosas workers the money that they unjustly deducted from their paychecks. Now, workers are calling on students, international solidarity activists, and the new Salvadoran government to pressure Adidas to comply with the workers' demands.

The implementation of the CAFTA agreement in 2006 has made it even easier for companies to carry out this kind of labor exploitation in El Salvador and the rest of Central America. By prioritizing corporations' rights to profit from the hiring and firing of cheap labor, and by permitting companies to legally challenge 'barriers' to foreign investment (such as strong labor rights protections), free trade agreements like CAFTA facilitate the closure of organized factories so that foreign investors can avoid being held accountable for workers' rights abuses. The Las Hermosas factory is just one example of this trend. According to Estella, "Many companies have closed their factories in one corner of the country and moved to another area as an excuse to avoid paying their workers." However, Estella affirmed, "If there is a way to fight to keep unionized factories in El Salvador, it will be through solidarity from international organizations and students." ■

**Leftist president from pg. 1**

tee credit to small-scale agricultural producers, and the expansion of the Rural Community Solidarity Network to guarantee access to health, nutrition and free public education for the most vulnerable sectors of society.

The speech was imbued with the themes of social justice, equality, and a “peaceful and democratic revolution.” Funes stated that El Salvador would no longer have a “government of the few, of the privileged,” but one where all people would be “recognized for their talents and honesty, not for their connections or their last name.” He spoke of his teacher and mentor, Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, whose tomb he visited the morning of the inauguration and whose vision of a “preferential option for the poor” was a pillar of Funes’ campaign platform.

President Funes emphasized the importance of investing in the public sector and of transparent, democratic public administration, marking a clear break from the notorious corruption and privatization schemes of the right-wing ARENA government during the last twenty years. Funes explained that, even though the economic crisis was neither the fault of the Salvadoran people nor the FMLN, it is his government’s responsibility to resolve it. He vowed to fight corruption within the government and the police, stating that “the time of bankrolling and impunity is over.” He said frankly, “There are leaders and political parties who have had their chance and they have failed. Now it is our turn and our responsibility. It is time to show that we haven’t waited this long to govern just to frustrate the dreams of the Salvadoran people.”

The bold public exposure of corruption and cronyism of past right-wing governments signals a major shift in El Salvador’s political climate, as does the homage to the Archbishop Romero, whose 1980 assassination was orchestrated by the founder of the ARENA party. It was a very emotional experience for many Salvadorans and long-time solidarity activists to see the leadership of the FMLN, many of whom, including Vice-President Sánchez Cerén, were guerrilla commanders, being saluted by the Salvadoran military and taking the reigns from the very government that killed over 75,000 Salvadorans in its attempt to stop the FMLN from coming to power during



The FMLN’s Mauricio Funes, wearing the Salvadoran presidential sash, speaks to a “sea of red” at the Cuscatlan Stadium on June 1

**CISPES Summer Victory Tour!**  
CISPES will be touring 2 long-time FMLN leaders to 14 cities this June and July. Find out more at [www.cispes.org](http://www.cispes.org)



the civil war.

Despite the decorum and formality of the inauguration ceremony, many in the crowd erupted into cheers of “Sí se pudo, Sí se pudo! (Yes we did!)” and “El pueblo unido jamás será vencido! (The people united will never be defeated!)” with their left fists in the air. The excitement and energy of the FMLN’s supporters only increased at the “people’s inauguration,” the party’s public celebration at Cuscatlán Stadium that lasted into the night. Salvadorans came from across the country, arriving as early as 3:00 a.m., to be part of what former FMLN leader Schafik Handal once promised would be “A Date with History.” Over fifty thousand people formed a celebratory sea of red and white in the stadium, cheering and dancing to the music of historic revolutionary groups like Cutumay Camones and Los Guaraguao as they waited for the appearance of their new President.

Before Funes spoke, other Latin American leaders, including Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega, congratulated the Salvadoran people on their triumph and welcomed El Salvador into the cadre of leftist and progressive countries in Latin America. In his speech at the stadium, Funes announced that, in one of his first acts as president, he had formally re-established diplomatic relations with Cuba and would move toward regional integration in Central America. Funes also recognized the great sacrifice of many Salvadorans throughout decades of struggle.

A banner hanging in the stadium read: “Only the people can guarantee that the electoral victory will become popular power.” Impassioned organizing by the Salvadoran people, both during thirty years of struggle and during the past year of electoral campaigning, resulted in the first leftist government in the country’s history, and will remain the most powerful force in what Funes called “the work of re-inventing the world.” ■

tions after, so they can live in a land that they work and that will belong to them and their children.

Nevertheless, the people and land of El Salvador continue to be exploited by Free Trade Agreements like CAFTA. The people we met explained that the beauty and resources of this small country are being polluted and destroyed at an alarming rate. The Rio Lempa, the largest and cleanest water source in El Salvador, is being exploited and will die within 60 years. Stories like this, and of the workers of the Las Herosas factory, highlight the need for the solidarity movement in the United States.

As people that live in United States, we have the responsibility to challenge our government's involvement in other countries and the policies it creates. We know that el pueblo Salvadoreño is fighting the Free Trade Agreements its former government has made, and we need to partner with them and challenge U.S. trade policy.

In addition to trade policy, the U.S. intervenes in El Salvador through the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), where the U.S. trains Salvadoran police to battle "terrorism." Exactly what type of terrorism is the Salvadoran government fighting? What does it mean to be a "home grown terrorist"? Will the police be used to repress leftist social movements when they take to the streets to make their voices heard against corruption and injustice? I know that CISPES will continue to work with the leftist movements of El Salvador to denounce the injustices of the U.S. and the Salvadoran right wing.

I felt blessed and privileged to be able to experience even a small piece of El Salvador's, and this continent's, transformation. The CISPES delegation gave me, a first generation *Salvadoreña* born in the USA, the opportunity to connect my organizing and political work to my roots. I came back from El Salvador revitalized by the spirit of the people, and determined to keep educating, mobilizing and organizing.

*¡Hasta La Victoria! ¡Siempre!* ■



The author observing the March presidential elections

## Action ideas for local activists:

### *Working in solidarity with the people of El Salvador and the new FMLN administration*

In the coming months and years, the people of El Salvador will be charting a new path. In this pivotal moment, the FMLN will use its first presidential term to create new alliances, lay new foundations of national autonomy, and create alternative systems that truly benefit the people.

We are already seeing complex reactions from foreign administrations and power-holders. In the United States, we were pleased that our representatives embodied neutrality during the election process, and officially expressed support to the newly-elected Salvadoran government. On the other hand, in the mainstream U.S. media we have seen signs of a more critical, even damning analysis of the FMLN, red-baiting the new administration and even going so far as to warn of terrorist tendencies. Given the long history of U.S. intervention in the affairs of other countries, we know how high the potential for such intervention is, especially when a progressive government takes a stand for its own political and economic interests.

In this context, there are many roles for those who want to work in solidarity with the Salvadoran people in this challenging process. For those who feel inspired by the progressive movement in Latin America as a whole, and for those who understand the momentous importance of El Salvador joining into that wider shift, CISPES has compiled a few concrete ideas for how you can express your support and contribute to the movement.

\* **Learn about the real face of the new administration:**

Read and distribute media: Don't let mainstream media shape your understanding of the FMLN. Check out the "Links" tab on the CISPES website. Share articles and CISPES news updates with friends and colleagues.

\* **Attend CISPES events:** Find out about summer events and come hear about the plans of the new Salvadoran government.

\* **Participate in CISPES educational nights:** Contact your local CISPES office to find out when the next "ed night" is in your city.

\* **Help create the public image of the new administration:** Create your own media: Talk to your local CISPES committee for ideas about getting info out in media outlets in your city. Schedule a presentation for your group or organization: Are you part of a church, union, or other community organization? Invite CISPES to give a presentation to your group about its work and the historic opportunity for change in El Salvador.

\* **Meet with your government representatives:** Schedule congressional visits: Thank your representatives for their commitments to neutrality toward El Salvador's democratic process, or demand that they make such a commitment next time!

\* **Support the new administration and the social movement:** Contribute to material aid fundraising: Check out the amazing projects that we are supporting this year, and make out a check!

\* **Support your local CISPES committee:** CISPES has active committees in cities throughout the U.S. Check the CISPES website for contact info: [www.cispes.org](http://www.cispes.org)

# CISPES Chapter profile: OLYMPIA

The Olympia Chapter of CISPES has been working hard this spring to bring the victory in El Salvador home to the South Puget Sound area of Washington state. Olympia was lucky enough to have three folks travel to El Salvador to witness the triumph of real democracy in El Salvador as part of the CISPES election observation delegation in March. Following the election, our committee focused on organizing a Latin American Solidarity Conference, which culminated with the FMLN inauguration party on June 1st.

The Olympia chapter has grown in numbers and commitment by working with a group of Evergreen State College students who recently returned from a trip to Venezuela. This collaboration is building excitement about the leftward shift taking place in Latin America. This group worked with Olympia CISPES to put together the Latin American Solidarity conference, which was highlighted by visits from

Eva Golinger, author of the book “Bush vs. Chavez”, and Martin Sanchez, the Venezuelan Consul in San Francisco. The weekend included workshops and panels on U.S. intervention and solidarity work, and concluded with the celebration of the inauguration of Mauricio Funes as the first FMLN president of El Salvador.

Olympia also will host the CISPES Victory Tour in early June, featuring FMLN representative William Hernandez. William’s participation in Olympia is part of our continued mission to bring the voices of people leading the struggle in El Salvador and throughout Latin America to our community.

Another really exciting project of Olympia CISPES is the formation of a broader Latin American Solidarity Group. This group is still in the formation stages, but is comprised of a handful of solidarity groups here in Olympia. The Solidarity Conference was the first project, and we also have a radio show on our local community radio, KOWA FM. Both of these spaces are used to highlight the linkages between struggles across the continent.

Olympia CISPES is now preparing for CISPES’ 13th National Convention, taking place in Seattle this August. We look forward to helping our Seattle CISPES companer@s put together a great convention and also look forward to being part of this historic moment for CISPES and El Salvador. ■



Olympia CISPES marches on Mayday in Washington State

## *elections analysis cont. from pg. 1*

sources agree that the most egregious fraud — the mobilization of illegal, foreign voters — was set in motion by ARENA long before the polls opened. Reports of Guatemalans, Hondurans and Nicaraguans trucked in by ARENA members and holed-up in preparation for Sunday’s vote were heard across the country in the days leading up to the election. Indeed, CISPES observers responded to two such reports on the eve of the vote.

The FMLN was also ready to respond to this devious, but all-too familiar ploy. FMLN activists arose at 2:00, 3:00 and 4:00 a.m. on election day to watch over roads to prevent busloads of illegal voters from entering their towns. In San Salvador and San Miguel, neighborhood residents and FMLN activists linked arms and sealed off buildings where foreigners were housed, collectively vowing not to let anyone leave on election day. Salvadorans assumed authority over their own elections, protecting the true voice of the pueblo, and it worked.

At 9:30 p.m. on Sunday, March 15, Mauricio Funes gave his victory speech. The streets were already filled with thousands and thousands of Salvadorans celebrating the people’s victory, waving FMLN flags, chanting “Sí se pudo, sí se pudo!” (“Yes, we did!”) and crying tears of joy. Amidst this ecstatic backdrop, Funes dedicated his presidency to Monseñor Romero — the Archbishop of San Salvador who was assassinated in 1980 for his unshakable support of El Salvador’s poor — and committed to making “profound changes in the model of public management, of transparency, of participation and of social justice.” ■

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