

# EL SALVADOR Watch

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## El Salvador's anti-mining movement hosts counterparts from across the Americas

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From April 12th-16th, delegations from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Norway, the United States, and Canada participated alongside El Salvador's National Roundtable Against Metallic Mining (known as the Mesa) in an international conference entitled "Mining in Mesoamerica: Sustainable

Development or a Threat to National Sovereignty?" The objectives of the conference – held in San Salvador – were to encourage a national cross-sector dialogue about the issue of mining in El Salvador and the impending international lawsuits filed by North American mining companies, to coordinate actions to fight the lawsuits with the U.S. and Canadian solidarity movements, and to articulate and give direction to a coordinated Mesoamerican anti-mining movement.

"This display of solidarity, this exchange of experiences with the visiting *compañeros* and *compañeras*, is going to allow



Organizers and lawyers gather in San Salvador for regional conference Photo: Diario Co-Latino

us to bring the resistance to the international level," said Ángel Ibarra, President of the Salvadoran Ecological Society (UNES) and member of the Mesa, at a press conference marking the opening of the conference. "This is also a display of commitment. We will continue from our communities

to resist the mining companies that dare to come to El Salvador," he added.

The week began with a visit to the rural department of Cabañas, where conference participants expressed their solidarity with the local anti-mining movement and heard testimonies of the social conflict the Canadian mining company Pacific Rim has brought to the area. Representatives of

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## Remembering Romero: Thirty years later

I stood at the back of a small sanctuary, looking up the aisle toward the wooden pulpit. I imagined sitting in the pews, listening to Monseñor Romero giving Mass. What had it been like for the congregants on the morning of March 24, 1980, witnessing his murder? I was struck by a sense of awe and humility: what must it have been like for him to stand up there at the pulpit? What kind of strength and courage must it have taken to continue to speak out, knowing he could be killed at any time?

It was 2004 and I was on my first delegation to El Salvador. Across the street from the church, I stood in a small room in the house where he lived, which has since been turned into a museum. Reading quotes from his popular Masses, I started to get a sense of the depth of the faith that sustained and guided him, and how profoundly he believed his famous declaration: "*Si me matan, me resucitaré en la lucha del pueblo salvadoreño*" ("If they kill me, I will rise again in the struggle of the Salvadoran people").

Monseñor Óscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador and "la voz de los sin voz" ("the voice of the voiceless") is revered by Salvadorans for his ministry, his unflinching advocacy for El Salvador's poor majority and open condemnation of U.S.-funded repression by the right wing Salvadoran government, which resulted in his assassination on March 24, 1980.

His sacrifice was indeed a catalyst for thousands more Salvadorans to put their own lives at risk and join the struggle for popular liberation. It was also a lightning rod for the international community, bringing cities, churches and individuals into the Central American solidarity movement. The principles of liberation theology inspired much of the popular organizing in rural Salvadoran communities throughout the 1980s. If it weren't for the physical and tactical support of the Christian base communities, the guerrilla forces would not have been able to outmaneuver the U.S.-backed military forces.

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# Now Serving the *Pueblo*: The New Ministry of Public Works

A new *El Salvador Watch* column highlighting progressive change in El Salvador's social ministries

Notoriously the most corrupt of ministries under ARENA party leadership over the last 20 years, the Ministry of Public Works has begun to truly fulfill its function under the new direction of President Funes' appointed minister, long-time FMLN leader Gerson Martínez. Socially responsible infrastructure that supports economic growth for rural and urban communities is the theme of the Ministry of Public Works in the era of El Salvador's first leftist government. The ministry, known as "MOP" (*Ministerio de Obras Públicas*), has its work cut out for it: A system of crumbling highways, aging bridges that no longer clear El Salvador's rivers – many swollen by global warming – and a severe deficit of quality housing for Salvadorans are some of the most pressing challenges to face.

Straight out of the gate, the new minister was thrown a crisis with Hurricane Ida tearing through El Salvador last November, destroying bridges, burying communities, and razing homes. The extent of destruction caused by Ida is itself a testament to irresponsible and poorly designed bridge, highway and housing projects sponsored by the ARENA-era MOP. In fact, El Salvador's current "qualitative and quantitative" housing problem is clearly linked to the thousands of families displaced by natural disasters over the past 30 years who were handed shoddily-constructed "temporary" housing that has become permanent. Worse still, many were never provided any replacement housing at all. In contrast, the families who lost their homes to Ida are temporarily residing in provisional housing as their permanent new homes are built on lands purchased by the Salvadoran government and deemed safe for the country's 6-month rain and hurricane season. In addition to Ida reconstruction, there are 25,000 new homes under construction through the "*Casa para Todos*" ("A house for everyone") program, and subsidies are available to assist aspiring home-buyers who earn the minimum wage or less.

The Funes Administration has emphasized the importance of building roads to serve rural communities, especially in the northern zone of the country. In many areas, treacherous dirt roads have been the norm for decades. The lack of serviceable infrastructure for ground transport significantly impacts local economies and restricts

residents' travel to cities, other towns or even nearby villages, be it for medical care, to sell farm products, or to vote. Under Minister Martínez, MOP has already begun working with long-neglected rural municipalities to pave important travel routes that connect communities and link to major highways.

The ministry is pushing to ensure that rural communities benefit from the Northern Highway project, funded by Millennium Challenge

Corporation grants (MCC) from the U.S. government. When former President Saca signed the agreement, it included a condition that 4 feeder highways would be built as part of the project, to ensure that large and small population centers would have access to the central highway. Now that the northern highway is near completion, the MCC claims that there is no funding for the feeder roads, leaving local communities questioning for whose benefit



*Minister of Public Works Gerson Martínez (right) inspects new drainage canals to prevent flooding in Ilopango.* Photo: Diario CoLatino

the highway is really being built.

However, the new MOP has picked up where the MCC failed to provide. The MOP has drawn up project plans and mobilized machines, materials and workers for the feeder highways. The final piece is the funding, which the minister has aggressively sought from U.S.-based international banking institutions.

Unfortunately, it's easy to make plans but difficult to make these plans a reality with a Salvadoran State severely indebted to international banks, limited tax and trade revenues, and a heavy dependence on international loans to finance projects. Nonetheless, Minister Martínez will not take no for an answer. "Not having money is not enough of an excuse," the minister said during a recent visit to Washington, D.C. "Why did we come to power if we're not going to make changes?"

This can-do attitude has already translated into pragmatic, resourceful initiatives in the first year of the Funes Administration: using military officers to guard construction sites instead of hiring private security firms, thereby saving millions in government funds a year; employing at-risk youth to build much-needed parts for public sewer systems, offering new options to youth facing high levels of unemployment.

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# Funes Administration, Human Rights Office Defend Autonomy of National University, Refuse Calls to Repress Student Occupation

by J.L. Heyward, DC CISPES

On March 17, a two week long student shutdown of the University of El Salvador (UES) ended with off-campus student negotiations and an agreement by the Minister of Education, Human Rights Office and the Superior Counsel of the University (CSU) to create a roundtable to address the school's resource crisis and create alternative budget proposals. The FMLN government's actions opened new era of dialogue with UES students on long-held grievances and broke with the status quo of past administrations which ordered police and military attacks on student protests.



March 2010: Students defend the autonomy of the National University Photo: El Faro

Five groups calling themselves “Los Aspirantes” (the Aspiring Students) staged the closure, demanding that school officials immediately enroll 800 new students who had been denied admittance to the UES, El Salvador's only public university, due to lack of resources. There were many other student organizations, however, who opposed the shutdown, arguing that the issue was a matter of national budget priorities, not lack of will on the part of the University. The 20 opposing groups, representing a much broader cross-section of the student base, have been vying for larger admissions each year through various means, including class audits and negotiations with University administrators. The groups claim that until a massive budget constraint is resolved at the national level, the school, with a current enrollment of 50,000 students, cannot constructively admit more students.

Throughout the two-week *toma* (occupation), major daily newspapers including the *Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* attempted to force the hand of the riot police – the Unit of Maintenance and Order (UMO) – to intervene, running provocative interviews with the Director of the National Civilian Police (PNC), Carlos Ascencio and the FMLN's Minister of Public Security, Manuel Melgar. Meanwhile, the University's Rector, Rufino Quezada,

sought to put down the protest through his own aggressive means, portraying the student protestors as criminals and calling for immediate arrests and charges by the Attorney General's Office.

Many vividly recall the National Civilian Police's most recent incursion onto the UES campus in 2006, when the UMO and other “elite squadrons” were ordered by the right-wing ARENA party to silence youth protests against a hike in bus fare. After opening fire onto the University and illegally occupying the school for four days, the PNC falsely claimed that it had discovered a stockpile of weapons and evidence of terrorist activity. It went on to further endanger the lives of a number of leftist student organizers by branding them terrorists and displaying their photos prominently in mainstream press; this was a tactic the right wing and the military used during the war to sow public terror and endorse death squad assassinations of organized workers, campesinos and rebellious youth.

The UES has long been at the vanguard of political organizing in El Salvador; students were fighting the same struggle of accessibility in the 1970s. Current Minister of Public Security, Manuel Melgar was himself a student at the UES. Many former FMLN combatants gained their political education and first organizing experiences there and saw comrades die defending the school's autonomy during the 1975 student massacre; the issue of the University's struggle, therefore, is of great concern for many FMLN officials who are now charged with making security decisions for the country.

The administration's response to the March 2010 student occupation was very different from that of previous administrations, demonstrating respect for the University's autonomy, the Peace Accords, and the student struggle. When Rufino Quezada called for on the PNC to unchain the gates and arrest the aspiring university students, Minister of Security Manuel Melgar refused the dean's request, instead encouraging the university administration to exhaust all avenues of negotiation.

During two weeks of occupation and negotiation, the second block of over twenty student organizations played a critical role in defending the autonomy of the University and the safety of the other students, even though they did not support their demands. Hundreds of students held peaceful demonstrations outside the

**...The issue of the University's struggle is of great concern for many FMLN officials now charged with making security decisions for the country.**

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***Mining Conference cont. from pg. 1***

Guatemala's indigenous mining resistance shared similar stories of the upheaval and violence experienced in their communities after mining companies showed up. Francisco Pineda of the Cabañas Environmental Committee (CAC) thanked the international organizations for their support, explaining that the solidarity of "other people are out there in other countries supporting us in our struggle helps us to go on in the face of the violent terror campaign being waged against activists in Cabañas."

On Tuesday, the community organizations of Cabañas traveled to San Salvador to meet with U.S.-based lawyers to plan an international legal strategy for the anti-mining movement. Marcos Orellana of the D.C.-based Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) explained that transnational companies want the legal process for their lawsuits against El Salvador to be hidden from the public and hidden from the people who will be affected by the outcome. The rules that govern the cases are set up to promote that kind of closed-door process. That is why it is so important for the affected communities to take advantage of every opportunity they have to influence the outcome of these cases.

One possibility is for the Mesa to present an Amicus Curiae before the International Center for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID)—the international tribunal where Pacific Rim's \$100 million lawsuit against the Salvadoran government will be decided. This legal document is the mechanism by which El Salvador's mining resistance can present its position and arguments in the case as an interested party, though ICSID rules do not require the tribunal to accept or even read the document.

The international conference's public event took place on Wednesday, April 14th. While over 300 attendees listened to speakers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico discuss the social, health, and environmental damages mining had brought to their communities, a brigade of activists from the Mesa held a simultaneous street action

across the street. They set up signs and posters with photos of the environmental and health damages brought about by metallic mining (dried-up rivers and wells, children suffering from lead and heavy metal poisoning, dead livestock, etc.) in front of El Salvador's largest shopping mall and major public transport hub, MetroCentro. As shoppers, pedestrians, vendors, and commuters passed by the photos, activists from the Mesa talked to them and distributed literature about the dangers of mining and the international lawsuits that El Salvador is now facing.

**YO RECHAZO LA  
MINERIA  
METALICA**

Back inside the forum, Marcos Orellana of CIEL, an expert in international environmental law, spoke about Pacific Rim's lawsuit against El Salvador. He specifically discussed how Chapter 10 of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) — the investor protections chapter that Pacific Rim is basing its argument on — grants transnational companies supposed "rights" to profits at the expense of the country's sovereignty. As the Pacific Rim lawsuit clearly demonstrates, this chapter creates a legal framework by which a foreign company can blackmail a country in retaliation for the creation of laws that protect the country's own citizens.

The closing event of the international conference was the "Mesoamerican encounter," in which the Mesa sat down with the delegations representing the mining resistance movements of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua to share organizing experiences, plan future regional events, and articulate strategic plans to continue coordinating a consolidated regional resistance.



*After the occupation, students marched to the Legislative Assembly to demand more funding for the University.*

Photo: El Faro

***University cont. from pg. 3***

UES, calling on the occupying students to re-open the campus while also demanding that the police refrain from entering the university.

On March 16, the University was re-opened, without police intervention, following mediation by Human Rights Ombudsman Oscar Luna. The creation of a permanent roundtable with the UES administration regarding the enrollment of new students is an important achievement for the organized student movement, which has for generations demanded access to University for all Salvadorans as part of the constitutional right to education.

*Romero cont. from pg. 1*

In the years since that first delegation to El Salvador, I have learned that Monseñor Romero was in many ways not unique. CISPES organizer Yeni Solis once told me, “The success of the Salvadoran revolutionary process has been that there are no single heroes. There have been thousands, such that when



*A mural of Romero, finally honored by the Salvadoran government 30 years after his murder.*

one fell, another would be there to take his or her place.” Monseñor Romero’s commitment to the self-liberation of poor and working people, the struggle for true peace and democracy, and the willingness to make personal sacrifice for the collective well-being is shared by the hundreds of thousands of people who continue to organize today as part of the FMLN and the Salvadoran social movement. These are the same principles that led to “the triumph of hope over fear” in the 2009 elections, when the FMLN won both the most number of seats in the legislative elections and the presidency.

At his inauguration last June, Mauricio Funes dedicated his presidency to Monseñor Romero, who had been a mentor of his during his brief time at the University of Central America. It was a transformative moment in Salvadoran history, especially thrilling because the former ARENA presidents were all sitting in the front rows. As presidents, they had publicly revered their party’s founder Roberto D’Abuisson, architect of Salvadoran death squads, who infamously said, “the person who killed Monseñor Romero is a hero”.

On Wednesday, March 24, 2010, the 30th anniversary of Archbishop Romero’s assassination, President Funes took

another step toward justice for the 70,000 civilians who were killed in the war. For the very first time, the Salvadoran government acknowledged and apologized for its role in Romero’s murder by a State-linked death squads. At a public ceremony to unveil a new mural dedicated to Romero at the Comalapa Airport, President Funes stated, “I ask forgiveness in the name of the Salvadoran State for this assassination, perpetrated 30 years ago, firstly from his family, secondly from the Salvadoran people and thirdly from the Catholic Church and religious organizations,” declared Funes. Monseñor Romero’s brother, Gaspar Romero, formally accepted the long-awaited government apology, responding, “With humility, love and gratitude, I accept this request for pardon, even though it comes 30 years later.”

This is an historic shift in El Salvador, hugely significant in the lives of many Salvadorans, both those who continue the struggle for justice and lasting peace in El Salvador and those who were forced to flee the country during the 1970s and 1980s because of horrific state repression. This shift is especially urgent today, when environmental activists like Marcelo Rivera, Ramiro Rivera and Dora Alicia Sorto Recinos – and young political leaders like Hector Ventura and Wilber Funes – are once again being targeted and killed by hit men and self-proclaimed “social cleansing groups.”

**“With humility, love and gratitude, I accept this request for pardon, even though it comes 30 years later.”**  
-Gaspar Romero,  
brother of Monseñor Romero

But the spirit of Monseñor Romero lives on. A family member of murdered anti-mining activist Ramiro Rivera recently told us, “Ramiro knew that he would be killed. But he told me that sometimes, something really shocking has to happen for others to wake up. He said that if his death would inspire the younger generation to join the struggle to defend their community, then he was willing to give his life.” At CISPES, we hope to live up to the memory of those who have given their lives to the struggle by supporting the next generation of Salvadoran solidarity activists. For more information on our “Radical Roots” delegation – led by and for young Salvadoran-American activists – in June 2010, please visit [www.cispes.org](http://www.cispes.org). **¡Romero vive! ¡La lucha sigue!** ■

-Alexis Stoumbelis, CISPES National Office

*MOP cont. from page 3*

The youth employment initiatives are starting in the communities where gang violence is highest.

One of the most striking MOP programs is shocking in its simplicity: to retrofit public hospitals to be wheelchair accessible and build “sensory pathways” for the blind, providing greater access to the very people who depend on hospital services. It is hard to imagine how a public hospital would not already be so equipped, and the new MOP’s correction of this ARENA-era “oversight” exemplifies the new, people-centered programming at the heart of the Funes and FMLN model of governance. Gerson Martinez’s MOP is tackling the big picture needs and the small, important details of making people’s lives easier – all of which is necessary for El Salvador to thrive and grow into the future.

# Reflections on the Northwest Latin American Solidarity Conference

By Ana Lottis, Seattle CISPES

We gathered between April 9th and 11th at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington: Over seventy of us, representing twenty-four organizations, with seven hundred years of combined experience as organizers and activists. We came from several Northwest cities – Portland, Olympia, Tacoma, Seattle, Bellingham, and Vancouver, B.C. – and were joined by companions from as far away as San Francisco, Denver and Washington, D.C. We came to deepen our knowledge of, discuss, and plan actions around issues ranging from the Honduran coup to Venezuelan social movements to the Northwest



Groups organizing against the NW Detention Facility presented at the conference.

Detention Center for immigrants to, of course, mining disputes in El Salvador. And we came to get to know each other, to learn more about each individual's and organization's focus so that we might better coordinate our efforts as a whole. Our experience was informative, stimulating and, best of all, incredibly fun.

We spent our first two days attending informational and discussion-based workshops, connecting with old friends, meeting new ones, and informally strategizing possible action plans. Each day had a keynote speaker, with Jesse Freeston, a journalist from The Real News Network, going first. He described his work covering the post-coup elections in Honduras, where he discovered just how at odds official U.S. portrayals of the results were with the evidence of massive fraud in plain sight. Saturday's keynote was up to Carlos Martínez, who came from San Francisco's Center for Political Education. Carlos spoke about the vibrant grass-

roots organizing currently occurring in Venezuela; activity which is often overshadowed overseas by the perception that Chávez is solely responsible for most of the country's political activity. Sunday's main event was a public event featuring Father Roy Bourgeois, founder of the School of the Americas Watch.

In between the keynote speakers, we chose from a number of workshops on topics including ALBA; the anti-war movement's responsibility towards Latin America; human rights accompaniment in Guatemala; movements for independence and labor rights in Puerto Rico; and Colombia's internal displacement crisis. The weekend wouldn't have been complete without the opportunity to let our hair down – or arrange it in a creative drag updo – at a *Quinceañero* dance sponsored by The Evergreen State College's chapter of MEChA.

Sunday morning was reserved for six simultaneous strategy sessions for different campaigns. This was CISPES' chance to get together with representatives of other organizations across the Northwest to discuss and plan for collaboration on anti-mining efforts, especially the May 27th National Day of Action against Pacific Rim Mining. We threw around a lot of creative, artistic and borderline insane ideas for how to make all of these campaigns work, and agreed to continue the joint planning with conference calls and follow-up networking.

Perhaps what struck me most about the conference was the common thread throughout that spoke to the heart of our purpose as solidarity activists. No matter what we discussed, from mining resistance in Cabañas to community radio in Venezuela, we focused not on the power we could give to those with whom we are in solidarity, but on the power they themselves demonstrate time and time again.

An issue often affecting international activism is the notion that the oppressed need some form of contact with outsiders to jump-start the process of liberation. Solidarity work, however, fundamentally recognizes the power of the oppressed, in both the past and present, to effect their own liberation. Solidarity activists work to provide resources for existing liberation struggles, but we also combat the ignorance in our home country that enables oppression - the ignorance which Father Bourgeois called the greatest enemy of justice. To paraphrase one colleague who spoke this weekend, by placing our struggles within a historical and geopolitical framework, and refusing to fall into the traps of well-meaning but patriarchal activism that seeks to save those in the global periphery, we instead place the periphery at the center of our work and challenge the structures that have marginalized it for centuries.

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