

# EL SALVADOR Watch

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## “We Won’t Let them Turn our Town into a Desert”

### *The Salvadoran Resistance to Metallic Mining*

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“Que bello”—how beautiful, whispered my 17-year-old neighbor Chepe as we stepped back to admire our work, paintbrushes still in hand. What had started out that morning as a faint sketch on an otherwise unremarkable wall was now colorfully taking



Members of ASIC, Association of Friends of San Isidro (Photo: American Jewish World Service)

form as a mural of a crane encroaching upon a lush landscape. A steady stream of people had been arriving since the morning—on foot, on bicycles, in the back of a rusting red pickup—all eager to take up brushes and declare their opposition to gold mining in their town.

In March 2008, I arrived in San Isidro, a rural municipality of 10,000 people in Cabañas, one of El Salvador’s poorest regions. I was there to volunteer with Asociación Amigos de San Isidro, Cabañas (ASIC), a grassroots community-development organization. When I first set foot in the dusty town, I had

no idea that I was walking into the epicenter of a national and international battle.

The gold-rich subsoil of northern El Salvador has attracted various foreign mining companies, among them Pacific Rim, which operates the most advanced gold exploration project in the country. It operates in San Isidro, near tributaries of

the Lempa River—the lifeline of much of Cabañas and El Salvador. Exploratory drilling—the process by which the company finds gold deposits—has deepened groundwater levels, causing water sources in several of San Isidro’s rural communities to dry up.

A local activist, Graciela Funes, pointed to an empty cement tank that once was a well, saying, *continued on pg 4*

## Ministry of Labor’s New Leadership Gets High Marks from Salvadoran Unions

by Leah Wilson

“It was a historic event,” said Marielos de León, describing a demonstration organized by the Salvadoran Union Front (FSS) at the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare on October 6th. “It was the first time workers have shown public support for the Ministry of Labor. The previous ministers haven’t deserved it,” continued the FSS’s representative for the *maquila* sector. The coalition of unions convened the activity in recognition of the changes implemented by the new Minister of Labor, Dr. Marina de Áviles, during her first hundred days on the job. The Minister joined the workers to thank them for their support. But she was frank about the challenges the Ministry faces. According to de León, “she told us it wouldn’t be easy, but that she had arrived to do her job as defined by the law.”

According to Salvadoran workers and unionists, simply

doing the job at all is a radical change from past Ministers. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare is charged with overseeing relations between employers and workers, facilitating a harmonious relationship that respects the rights of workers. But just over four months ago, the Ministry was by and large closed-off to workers. “We couldn’t get a meeting with the Minister under previous administrations,” says de León. “Occasionally they would give us an appointment with an advisor.” These meetings were often humiliating experiences in which functionaries were disrespectful and showed no intention of resolving the workers’ complaints.

During twenty years of Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) presidencies, the Ministry of Labor was characterized by responding only to the interests of businesses and employers,

*continued on pg. 5*

# CISPES Committees Take to the Streets!

## *Demonstration at Pacific Rim Headquarters kicks off CISPES' anti-mining campaign*

by Cameron Herrington, Seattle CISPES

With a series of coordinated actions and events held in mid-October, CISPES and allies across the United States and Canada publicly launched a transnational people's movement to stop exploitative metallic mining in El Salvador before it starts. The series of events culminated on October 16 with a protest on the streets of Vancouver, British Columbia, outside the headquarters of the Pacific Rim mining company. Pacific Rim filed a \$77 million lawsuit against El Salvador in April after the government refused to grant extraction permits for the El Dorado mining project due to environmental and public health concerns.

CISPES' leadership role in the growing cross-border, grassroots anti-mining movement stems from a proposal adopted in August at the organization's biennial National Convention, held in Seattle. Responding to the urgency created by recent assassinations and death threats against anti-mining organizers in the Salvadoran department of Cabañas [see article on page 3], CISPES activists have wasted no time in getting the new campaign up and running around the country this fall.

In the Northwest region, 25 activists from CISPES committees in Portland, Oregon, and Olympia and Seattle, Washington, travelled across the border to Vancouver to participate in the October 16 demonstration at Pacific Rim headquarters. Occupying all four corners of a busy downtown intersection for 3 hours, 60 demonstrators made their presence known to the company and passers-by with flyers, banners, chants, and speeches. Three representatives of the group delivered a letter to Pacific Rim management calling for the company to drop its lawsuit and cease operations in the Cabañas department.

Throughout the week leading up to the protest, hundreds responded to a CISPES Action Alert with phone calls and e-mails calling on Pacific Rim to "drop the suit!" Meanwhile, CISPES committees nationwide are using street theater, forums, presentations, and protests to begin the important work of educating supporters and community members about the threats posed to human life and the environment by the proposed mining projects in El Salvador.

The October 16 protest in Vancouver – coordinated with new allies from Salvadoran immigrant and Latin America solidarity organizations in British Columbia – kicked off a new, cross-border phase of the anti-mining struggle, which

began in the early 2000s in Salvadoran municipalities where mining companies were carrying out exploration activities. Community organizations throughout northern El Salvador quickly coalesced to form a powerful coalition, the National Roundtable Against Metallic Mining in El Salvador, which now also counts the Catholic Church and internationally-recognized NGOs such as Oxfam among its ranks.

The National Roundtable has achieved significant success in preventing 29 proposed mining projects from being carried out in the northern zone of El Salvador. As a result of the coalition's extensive public education and lobbying work,

recent polling finds over 60% of Salvadorans opposed to mining in their country. Meanwhile, the administrations of both former President Antonio Saca and current President Mauricio Funes declared their opposition to the mining projects and refused to grant permits, prompting Pacific Rim and Commerce Group, another mining company based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to sue the Salvadoran government.



CISPES activists from Seattle, Portland and Olympia outside the Pacific Rim headquarters in Vancouver, BC

Most recently, the National Roundtable received the prestigious Letelier-Moffitt International Human Rights Award from the Institute for Policy Studies. The award was presented in a ceremony held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on October 15 and accepted by five representatives of the National Roundtable, who then took part in speaking tours that reached thousands of people throughout the U.S. and Canada [see article on page 3]. Miguel Rivera – a community leader from San Isidro, Cabañas – spoke in public events in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Baltimore before traveling to Washington state and Oregon on a CISPES-organized tour from October 19-24.

In addition to confronting the immediate threat posed by the Pacific Rim and Commerce Group lawsuits, CISPES and the international anti-mining movement are highlighting the need to change the free trade rules that enable such lawsuits in the first place. Those rules, contained in Chapter 10 of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), allow foreign investors to sue governments in a special investment dispute tribunal governed by the World Bank if it can be argued that government actions – such as legislation designed to protect the environment, health, or labor rights – limit an investor's ability to make a profit.

*continued on pg. 4*

### **Mining Resistance** from pg. 1

“People used to come here to wash their clothes, bathe, and bring water to their houses. I am afraid that we will be left without water.”

If Pacific Rim were to receive the extraction permit that it seeks from the Salvadoran government, the results would be disastrous. In a single day, the mine would use 900,000 liters of water—a quantity that could sustain the average Salvadoran household for 20 years. It would also use two tons of cyanide and other toxic substances, which would end up in the rivers, groundwater, air and rain.

Due to heavy deforestation, a long dry season, and inadequate facilities for treating wastewater, Salvadorans’ access to potable water is already low, particularly in rural areas. And given the importance of water for agriculture—the principle livelihood in the region—residents are outraged that their land is being ravaged for foreign economic gain.

In collaboration with local youth and other community groups, ASIC has painted three murals in San Isidro that celebrate the environment and denounce the exploitation that threatens to destroy it. They are part of an awareness campaign designed to get community members involved in the anti-mining movement.

When we finished our project, the community held a celebration inaugurating the murals. Hundreds of people from surrounding municipalities attended the event, which included a performance by 22-year-old rapper Wilfredo Lainez, a local hero for his socially conscious music. That day, he gazed out intently at the audience as he rapped: “We won’t let them turn our town into a desert.”

Armed with paint, words, and homemade beats, the people of San Isidro—from lawyers, to farmers, to young kids dreaming of a better life—are uniting, a veritable David up against a bulldozer-clawed Goliath. They have been joining forces with similarly affected communities throughout El Salvador and Central America through coalitions like the National Roundtable against Metallic Mining (see below). It is my hope that their work will pay off, and that access to clean water will become an inalienable right for all rather than a privilege for some.

I asked Ramiro Rivera, a community leader from a nearby town, why this cause is so important. He replied: “We are asking for respect, because even as a small community, we have dignity.” ■

*-by Julia Kaminsky, NY CISPES. Originally published by American Jewish World Service, one of ASIC’s international partners*

## **Salvadoran Activists Denounce Human Rights Abuses During Visit to Washington, DC**

*by Emma Boorboor, DC CISPES*

On October 14, 2009, in Washington, D.C., the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) presented five delegates from the National Roundtable Against Metallic Mining with the prestigious Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award for their work to stop unwanted mining. “This prize inspires us to keep moving forward, until the threat of mining is abolished forever in El Salvador,” exclaimed Vidalina Morales, representative from the Roundtable upon receiving the award. During their time in Washington, CISPES accompanied the organizers to meetings with Congress, where they challenged U.S. Representatives to take action to change unfair U.S. trade deals like NAFTA and CAFTA that privilege corporate rights over community, labor and environmental rights.

In an event entitled “Extractive Industries: Trade Justice and Human Rights” at American University, Roundtable representative William Castillo asserted that he was primarily concerned with the underlying problem: the imposition of the neoliberal economic doctrine. He solemnly reported that the people of El Salvador still have not seen the social benefits promised by neoliberal economic programs; instead, Salvadorans have only seen negative impacts, including increased migration and new environmental problems.

Despite the celebration surrounding the award, the presentations were marked by profound sadness. Marcelo Rivera, co-founder and president of ASIC, was found dead with signs of torture on June 28th after he was disappeared ten days earlier. Since his assassination, there have been continued death threats and attempted kidnappings in the department of Cabañas, including of priest Luis Quintanilla and staff at Radio Victoria, a community radio station. On August 7th, community leader Ramiro Rivera, quoted above, survived an attempt on his life. Though he was shot eight times, he is now recovering and in a safe refuge. Community members claim that the shooter, Oscar Menjívar, is a former employee of Pacific Rim; the company denies that he was ever an employee.

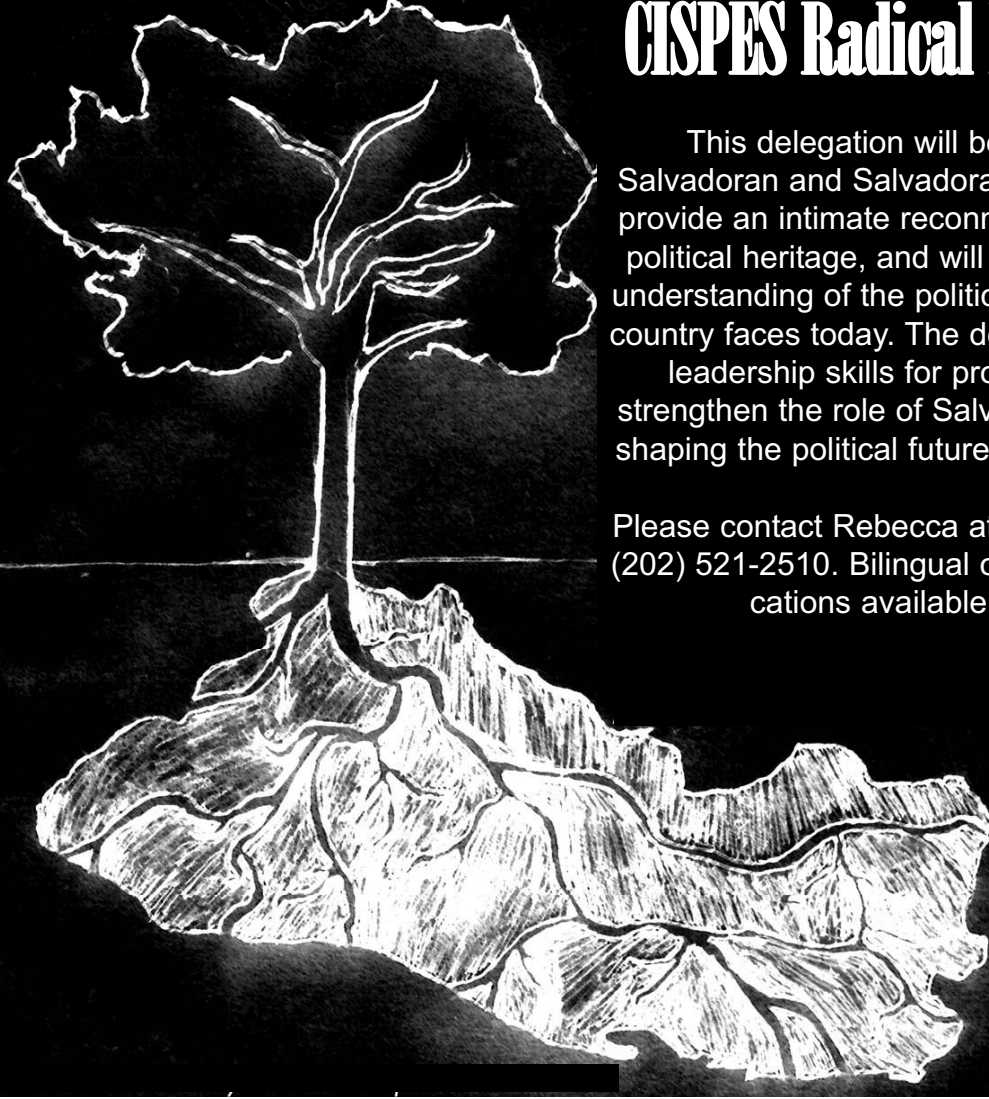
CISPES is joining with human rights and solidarity organizations to put international pressure on El Salvador’s new Attorney General, Romeo Barahona, to do a thorough investigation into this rise in death-squad style violence against environmental activists and to stop the impunity.

**Please take action today at [www.cispes.org](http://www.cispes.org)!**



*!Marcelo Rivera, presente!  
(photo: SHARE Foundation)*

# CISPES Radical Roots Delegation



This delegation will be specifically tailored to Salvadoran and Salvadoran-American young adults to provide an intimate reconnection to their personal and political heritage, and will tie these experiences to an understanding of the political and social issues that the country faces today. The delegation is intended to build leadership skills for progressive organizing and strengthen the role of Salvadorans living in the U.S. in shaping the political future of El Salvador and the U.S.

Please contact Rebecca at [rebecca@cispes.org](mailto:rebecca@cispes.org) or call (202) 521-2510. Bilingual outreach materials and applications available at [www.cispes.org](http://www.cispes.org)

**January 2-10, 2010**

Estimated cost:  
\$1300-\$1750, travel  
costs included;  
partial scholarships  
available

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## *Anti-mining protest continued from page 2*

Such provisions threaten the sovereignty of any Central American country whose government dares to place the wellbeing of its own people before the interests of international corporations.

Though CAFTA has been in effect since 2006, Pacific Rim is the first company to challenge the Salvadoran government with this type of investment arbitration. However, because Canada is not party to CAFTA, and therefore Canadian companies are ineligible to sue Central American governments using the trade deal's legal mechanisms, Pacific Rim chose to file its suit through a previously-dormant subsidiary in Nevada.

National Roundtable representative Miguel Rivera views this legal trickery as Pacific Rim's last-ditch effort to win a fight that it has already lost in El Salvador. Rivera points out that the communities located near Pacific Rim's proposed El Dorado mine are united in opposition to the project, as is a healthy majority of the country's overall population. Consequently, two consecutive presidential administrations have forcefully opposed the project and refused to issue permits. A proposed law to ban metallic mining in El Salvador is currently making its way through the Legislative Assembly.

Under normal circumstances the conflict would be over, and Pacific Rim would be forced to pack up and leave the country. However, because El Salvador is party to CAFTA, Pacific Rim is able to circumvent the sovereign decision of El Salvador's government by bringing its case before an international tribunal, which could force the government to pay \$77 million or more to the company.

"This is no longer a struggle to be fought in El Salvador," Miguel Rivera said on a speaking tour stop in Seattle on October 19. "In El Salvador, we've already won. This is now an international struggle, and it will be won or lost in North America." With the Pacific Rim and Commerce Group mining companies located in Vancouver and Milwaukee, respectively, and the lawsuits to be decided by a tribunal in Washington, D.C., it is up to CISPES and its allies in the U.S. and Canada to carry on the struggle in this new, decisive phase, which is indeed already playing out in North America. ■

explained Marielos Pleitez, a director of the public health-care workers union, SIGEESAL. When unions petitioned for legal status, official recognition was often given to the right-wing directors selected by the employers, instead of the directors legitimately elected by the membership. Resolutions were often approved without the workers' side of the story being heard. "You would be shown a document that said you had agreed to this and that, or that you had been informed of something, and it had never happened. The bosses just told them it did," described de León.

But the June 1st inauguration of Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) President Mauricio Funes and his cabinet, including Dr. de Áviles, is already bearing fruit. The biggest change noted by workers is a newfound openness in the Ministry. "[She] is responding to our petitions and meeting with [the unions and workers]. Slowly but surely, she is reviewing old cases that were ignored by previous Ministers and making pronouncements," said Wilfredo Berrios of the FSS.

El Salvador has relatively strong laws protecting workers and the right to unionize, but under previous administrations those laws were not enforced. This situation, however, is changing. Important accomplishments made by the new Minister include legal recognition of the union at the ABX Industries factory and recognition of an industrial telecommunications union.

For two years, the organized workers at ABX Industries had been refused legal recognition as a union and faced reprisal firings. Following a meeting with Dr. de Áviles, the union was given official recognition, celebrated its first official Assembly, and elected a board of directors on September 13th. The important work of negotiating a collective contract will now begin. SITCOM, an industrial telecommunications union formed in 2003 by workers at four different telecommunications companies, was also given official recognition after a six year struggle with the Ministry of Labor that included Supreme Court rulings in the union's favor.

According to the FSS, the most important thing Dr. de Áviles can accomplish in the Ministry of Labor would be to reduce and eventually do away with the back-log of complaints and cases that were never resolved by past Ministers. This would show that the Ministry is fulfilling its function as an arbitrator between workers and employers, resolving labor

conflicts in accordance with the law.

But workers and union leaders also recognize that the Minister will face many challenges in trying to transform the institution. At \$8 million, the Ministry of Labor has the lowest budget of all government ministries. In addition to the financial challenge, de León pointed out that, "the ARENA structures are still there... The ministry has been stacked with people that were opposed to the very concept of unions." She added, "we know it will take time to really change these structures, but the Minister is showing a willingness to do it."



El Salvador's New Minister of Labor and Social Welfare

Dr. de Áviles' new way of running

the Ministry has already drawn criticism from right-wing interests. "[The private business sector] says that the scales are now leaning towards the workers. This is false. The Ministry is now applying the law in an equitable form, as it should be," explained Berrios.

At the FSS demonstration, after thanking the workers for their support, Dr. de Áviles pledged to continue working with all sectors, rather than just business owners. "We are really seeing a transformation here," described Berrios, "from an institution that was intentionally run in such a way that it would not carry out its responsibilities to a Ministry that actually protects the rights of workers and enforces the duties of employers."

**Update on the Hermosas Worker Struggle**

One of the most emblematic cases that Dr. de Áviles has revisited is that of the ex-employees of the Hermosa Manufacturing maquila—which manufactured products for Nike, Adidas, and Russell Sport. For years, workers suffered countless abuses, including sexual harassment, withheld wages, and lack of medical care for workplace injuries. In 2005, the workers began to organize. However, when the owner noticed the union activity, he closed down the maquila, leaving almost 100 workers without jobs, blacklisted by other maquilas, and owed more than \$825,000 in unpaid salaries and benefits. After four years of continued denunciations and several court cases that ruled in favor of the workers, the majority of the money has still not been paid and the maquila owner has been unpunished.

On September 16th, Dr. de Áviles responded to a request from the ex-Hermosa Manufacturing workers and invited them to meet with her in the Ministry. She expressed disgust at the manner in which the case had been handled by the previous Ministers and agreed to the workers' demands to reopen the case and make a new ruling. Estela Ramírez, one of the workers who attended the meeting, explained that an ideal resolution would, "call on the company to pay the severance pay they owe us, pay the salaries we are owed, and the Social Security benefits they deducted from our wages but never paid." At the time of publication, the Ministry of Labor was still in the process of reviewing the case and preparing a pronouncement. However, Ramírez and other workers are encouraged by the Minister's concern and interest in the case and expect a favorable resolution soon.

# CISPES Chapter Profile: Washington, D.C.

by Sara Wallace-Keeshen, D.C. CISPES

"No more unjust trade agreements," chanted local trade justice activists on Tuesday, October 13th as they hoisted "Drop NAFTA and CAFTA!" and "Stop U.S. Economic Exploitation" signs and marched to demand that Congress address the root causes of immigration and keep families together. On October 13th, the newly formed D.C. CISPES committee joined Witness for Peace, Alliance for Global Justice and other trade justice organizations to form a 40 person trade-justice bloc that marched in solidarity with local immigrant rights activists, day laborers, and community-based organizations for just and humane immigration reform. According to Arturo Viscarra, the D.C. CISPES chapter's analysis of the root causes of migration was crucial in uniting anti-free trade and immigration reform organizations, which strengthened the immigrant rights march at the U.S. Capitol.

As a new committee located in the heart of U.S. Empire, D.C. CISPES is placed in a unique position to strengthen relationships with the Salvadoran community while actively pressuring the U.S. government to roll back the neo-liberal economic model, repeal CAFTA and stop other forms of economic, political and military intervention in El Salvador and across Latin America. Building off the energy of the FMLN's presidential victory in March, the D.C. CISPES committee began to grow and evolve last spring, drawing in local D.C. community members and experienced organizers excited about tackling U.S. imperialism on a local level in the nation's capital. Election Observation delegates from the D.C. area arrived back to the U.S. ready to talk to the press and to organize report-backs that would draw connections between the Salvadoran social movement and local women's rights groups, labor unions, and the D.C. chapter of the FMLN -- events which officially launched the a CISPES committee in D.C.

This summer, D.C. CISPES also worked with the National Office and the D.C. FLMN chapter to welcome FMLN representative Audelia Lopez on the 2009 Victory Tour by hosting a series of public events and meetings, ranging from an event with Salvadoran hotel-worker organizers and youth in Chirilagua, Virginia, to a brown-bag lunch discussing issues and obstacles women confront as organizers, especially in the labor movement.

After an event-filled summer, members of the D.C. committee have hit the ground running, working to build and strengthen relationships with Salvadoran and Latin@ youth organizations and recruit youth to attend CISPES' Salvadoran-American youth delegation, "Radical Roots," to El Salvador this January. In addition to work around the delegation, committee members have organized actions in solidarity with the Honduran resistance, including the prominent unfurling of a "Fuera Golpistas! (Coup Plotters, Out!)" banner at a National Press Club event attended by right-wing businessmen and diplomats defending the military coup, only to be escorted out while chanting, "The blood is on your hands!"

Most recently, committee members have been planning a regional anti-mining forum, set for early December in New York City, as part of the national campaign to pressure Pacific Rim Mining to drop its lawsuit against the Salvadoran government.

D.C. CISPES is strengthening existing relationships that the National Office has built with local social and economic justice organizations, and expanding the base of people committed to organizing in solidarity with the social movement of El Salvador. With the support of the national office and a growing relationship with the local Salvadoran community, activists hold high expectations for the committee's development. As committee member Rebecca Mintz stated, "we hope to expand and strengthen our relationship with the D.C. FMLN committee, and build a larger community of folks who are excited about challenging U.S. imperialism through organizing here in Washington." ■



Members of DC CISPES performing street theater on the Day of Action of Drop NAFTA and CAFTA

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