

CISPES Presente!

Snapshots of Resistance in El Salvador

Reflections by delegates: Eliza Sparkes and Sophia Hasenfaus of Boston CISPES; compiled by Chelsea Blake, West Coast Development Coordinator

This May Day, I traveled for the first time to El Salvador with a group of seven CISPES activists from across the country to celebrate with workers around the globe. The visible presence of international solidarity happened at a critical time as movement leaders and activists face increasing and violent repression. Not only that, but as individuals we took great pride in marching alongside many of the groups that CISPES has worked with in its 25-year history after having heard their inspiring stories of struggle and resistance. I hope you find inspiration in these images from our trip. – Chelsea



CISPES marched alongside the Salvadoran social movement for the May Day March. Banner reads: “CISPES Presente! Today and Forever. 25 Years of Solidarity. May 1st, 2005”

May Day 2005: A widespread mobilization for workers rights



Youth came out in force.



Workers from the labor movement carried banners reading slogans such as this: “Water Privatization = Death”



The next generation of organizers!

Examples of local economic sustainability

After meeting with the US Embassy, I was frustrated by the contrast between the “development” that the economic and political attachés and representatives of USAID advocated in El Salvador, vs. the needs that our partners in the social movement had expressed to us. That afternoon, we visited El Paisnal, one of the oldest FMLN municipalities. There medicines are sold at cost to the people while those who can’t afford them do not pay at all. Keeping the people healthy is a priority Juan Garcia Melara, mayor of El Paisnal told us, because “*tener un pueblo saludable es tener un pueblo productivo.*” [keeping the community healthy will keep the community productive.] Melara became mayor twelve years ago with only 91 colones (~ \$10 dollars) in the municipal bank. Since then they have built 5 elementary schools. An organic fertilizer and pesticide plant also produces shampoo from all natural ingredients in El Paisnal. A bag of fertilizer costs local farmers only \$5, when it costs \$35 in the store. That afternoon in El Paisnal we witnessed the work that can be done with unimaginably scarce resources. – Chelsea and Sophia



CISPES Delegates with local FMLN governmental officials of El Paisnal.

A history of overcoming loss and building alternatives

We spent a night at Las Marias, a majority women-led cooperative in Usulután that CISPES has accompanied for over ten years. Marina (Director of the Cooperative) led us on a walk through rolling hills. Marina told us the history of Las Marias from its founding to recently receiving organic certification for their coffee and fruit. A cooling breeze swept over us as Marina described how some from the cooperative had lived here during the years of the war. This land had everything they needed, she said. But as the violence increased, so did the government's persecution, and the deaths of her *compañeros**. In a quiet but determined voice she told us that many of them were buried right below us. It felt surreal standing on the very ground that had been inhabited by fallen *compas** so many years before. I could almost feel their energy at that moment. – Eliza

* *compañeros* = comrades; *compas* is slang for comrades



Marina, Director of Light on the Horizon Cooperative at Las Marias

The Legacy of Solidarity



Residents of Las Marias take CISPES activists on a tour of their communally owned land.

Late one night at Las Marias, we listened to Blandino Nerio (an FMLN deputy) as he described his experiences during the war fighting in the Las Marias region. He related stories about drinking foul water from an abandoned tank in the mountains, performing an amputation without a doctor and searching for an impossible cup of coffee in a region that produced it only for export. I will never forget his story of hiding up in the mountains and how the combatants often felt like they had no allies. One day, a rebel radio report transmitted the news that CISPES activists had demonstrated at the Pentagon in the US. Blandino testified that "we realized we WEREN'T alone, that we weren't fighting by ourselves." I couldn't control the goose bumps that appeared on my skin

and the sense of *orgullo* [pride] that I felt at that moment. I thought – now *that* is solidarity. – Eliza

People unite to reclaim the land

Our meeting with ANTA, the National Agricultural Workers Association, took us to a piece of land that people took over and have been living at for a year and a half near the coast. There we were confronted with the everyday poverty of many Salvadorans. Originally, all of the families involved in the land occupation were working with ANTA, but some people were asking "what is ANTA going to do for us?" One *campesino* [farmworker] explained "*We are ANTA!*" This community has remained firm and resisted the government's violent attacks and threats to kick them off the land. Being witness to their struggle and self-determination is an inspiration to continue our solidarity work. – Sophia



Community members stand in front of the homes they built for themselves, bravely defending their right to land and housing

