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EL SALVADOR LABOR, TERROR, AND PEACE

by Amelia Preece

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U.S. policies in El Salvador do not promote democracy, an end to terror, or free trade unions, according to the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador (NLC). The Committee is a coalition of 21 U.S. national union leaders, including Fraser and Bieber (UAW), Sheinkman (ACTWU), Wimpisinger (Machinists), McEntee (AFSCME), and others. Its report entitled *El Salvador: Labor, Terror, and Peace*, published in March 1984, disagrees with the AFL-CIO's policies in El Salvador. The NLC found that the government of El Salvador was making no progress on human rights, that recent elections did not offer solutions to the conflicts, and that U.S. aid will not alter the political or economic reality.

**Union Repression in El Salvador** -- Normal union activities are considered subversive by the government of El Salvador. According to the NLC study, "Salvadorian trade unionists, like their fellow trade unionists in other nations, are workers who have organized to fight for dignity and decency. In the twisted logic of politics in El Salvador today, this will to fight makes them 'subversives' -- and prime targets for right-wing repression, official and unofficial." An estimated 8,239 Salvadorian trade unionists have been murdered or abducted, have disappeared, or were wounded between 1979 and 1981. The FESINCONSTANS (a labor federation certified democratic by the U.S. Embassy) had members jailed for striking, and in 1979-1980 many union members were murdered including the secretary-general.

Many normal union activities are illegal. In 1984, nine trade unionists were facing trials by a military court charged with "Presenting demands to management for higher wages and benefits and promoting strikes which destabilize the economy."

The American policy in this region does not foster free trade union activity. The goals noted by the embassy deputy chief of mission, Ken Bleakley, were "to put a floor under the economic fall and give private investors confidence." Investor confidence at the expense of both trade union objectives and human rights appear to be acceptable to the American government.

**Government Reform** -- Since most Salvadorians are agricultural workers the most important economic reform may be land reform. Land reform was originally planned to occur in three phases. The first phase was to create cooperatives out of large land holdings, promising compensation to previous owners; the second phase was to address mid-sized properties, and phase three was to provide small land holdings to those who tilled the land.

The implementation of land reform has been limited. In 1984, 15% of the cooperatives formed in phase 1 were bankrupt or on the verge of bankruptcy. All the cooperatives were having difficulties finding needed credit due to 27% interest rates. Phase two, thought to be the most important section by the NLC, has not been implemented and there are no plans for its implementation.

Phase three has had numerous problems in its implementation and its conception. This program was to be closed to new peasant applicants by the Salvadorian assembly in the spring of 1984. This closing was opposed by the UDP, the centerist labor federation, which organized three days of protest demanding an extension of the deadline. Although an extension was granted there are major problems with the coverage of this program. 38,000 applied for this program but only 1,050 were accepted. They will not gain title to the land until the government compensates the previous owners in 10 to 30 years.

Phase three has been promoted by the American Institute of Free Labor Development, the AFL-CIO agency in El Salvador. However the NLC questioned the value of this program. "(F)or our delegation it was difficult to see how the reform as currently structured could ever significantly impact on El Salvador's campesinos (peasants)."

**Economic, Human Rights, and Political Repression** -- According to the American embassy, unemployment in El Salvador is close to 40%. The bonus system was ended by law and in 1980 wages were frozen in spite of inflation, with a one time wage increase of 10% allowed in 1982. This increase had not been received by any employees interviewed by the NLC. The sales tax has been increased from 2 to 5 percent. At the same time, multinationals have been allowed free trade zones where they pay no taxes for products manufactured in or exported out of the country.

Human rights improvements have been cosmetic. The amnesty, freeing of political prisoners and the new Salvadorian Human Rights Commission were all considered shams by the NLC. Members of the Salvadorian Human Rights Commission told the NLC that before torture confessions were accepted as evidence, "the guilty were getting off scot-free and security force morale was sinking. To save police morale, the government had no choice but to allow extra judicial evidence (torture confessions) in official court proceedings."

Union leaders and peasants interviewed had no faith in the willingness of the present political parties to make improvements. The Christian Democrats' headquarters in El Salvador was machine gunned during the committee's stay. Two weeks before their visit, a body was dumped, as a warning to a local Christian Democrat member of the Assembly who had strongly criticized Death Squad excesses.

The conservative business leaders of the ANEP (the Salvadorian National Free Enterprise Association), attack the American attempts to improve the human rights situation. One ANEP leader said "The war in El Salvador has nothing to do with poverty or oppression... We are simply next on the list of the international communist conspiracy"

**Union Activities in Latin America** -- The AFL-CIO spends \$19.2 million a year in Latin America. Most of this funding comes from the U.S. government: \$13.5 million from the Agency for International Development, and \$4.8 million from the National Endowment for Democracy. Only \$.9 million comes from the AFL-CIO, according to *Business Week*. The predominance of government funding makes the AFL-CIO operations in El Salvador responsible to the government rather than the union membership. It is well known that the AID works closely with the CIA.

The 16th biennial AFL-CIO convention debated labor's policy in El Salvador and Nicaragua, especially their policy concerning the AFL-CIO's support or condemnation of the Nicaraguan Contras, according to the *California AFL-CIO News* (Nov. 1, 1985). Their resolution of the debate opposes the Reagan Administration's emphasis on a military solution and states that "the AFL-CIO believes that negotiated settlement rather than military victory holds the best hope for the social, economic and political justice that the people of Nicaragua and El Salvador deserve."

This report can be obtained for a dollar from: National Labor Committee, 15 Union Square, New York, New York 10003.

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