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EL SALVADOR

Massive May Day Celebration

At least 50,000 Salvadorans took to the streets of San Salvador on 1 May to celebrate International Workers' Day, to denounce DR-CAFTA, to support the immigrant rights struggle in the US, to condemn injustice, and to demand respect for workers rights throughout the world.

The massive but peaceful march was made up of people from labor unions, the national movement of CD-DVD street vendors (who sell pirated products), religious groups, *campesino* and women's organizations, students, market vendors and red-shirted supporters of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), a former guerrilla movement that became a political party after the '92 peace accords.

Minutes before the march began, popular Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gómez symbolically swore in the 32 new FMLN members of the National Legislature (elected on 12 Mar, see Vol. 25, No. 4) before a throng of thousands of people who had assembled to participate in the May Day March. The newly elected legislators—who started their terms in office on 1 May—promised to carry out their duties in the interest of the popular masses.

The march was led by the public sector labor federations and unions that reject privatization, demand an end to the criminalization of illegal immigrants in the US, and demand government ratification of International Labor Organization agreements 87 and 98, which guarantee freedom of association and protect the right of workers to organize and for collective bargaining.

More than a thousand university students—loudly rejecting neoliberal capitalism and US economic imperialism—marched from the National University and met up with the main march of protesters at Boulevard de Los Heroes. “Because immigrants are not criminals, from El Salvador we demand just laws,” read the main banner of FESTRASPEs, a union of public employees. Other banners rejected the increasing repression of union organizing efforts in El Salvador and the establishment of the US-sponsored International Law Enforcement Academy, known as ILEA (Vol. 23, No. 12).

A couple of hours later, as the frontline of marchers reached San Salvador's Central Plaza, the last group of participants waiting in line were just beginning to start marching, and it was estimated that the column of marchers covered at least 30 blocks.

The immense march wound through the capital city and ended with a mid-day rally in the Central Plaza, where numerous labor leaders recounted the history of the labor movement struggle for workers' rights and denounced the neoliberal economic model as the cause of deterioration in the quality of life of Salvadorans and workers around the world.

For days, the right-wing ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance) government had attempted to intimidate and scare Salvadorans from participating in the march by publishing articles in major newspapers that portrayed the traditional May Day celebration as violent and by publishing and broadcasting commercials warning that the police would intervene in the case of rioting and/or property destruction. On May Day, there were reports that buses with protestors coming from outlying areas to San Salvador were stopped and turned back at police checkpoints, where vehicles were stopped and searched. Hundreds of police were deployed to "protect" US and Salvadoran corporate stores and restaurants. A police helicopter flew over the marchers and circled over the Central Plaza while allegedly making video recordings of the marchers.

Except for the spray-painting of graffiti on walls by young protestors, lots of shouting at police, and setting off firecrackers along the parade route, there were few incidents that required police intervention.

ARENA Attempts to Rush Legislative Approval Prior to 1 May

Right-wing legislators in the National Assembly—controlled by ARENA, the National Conciliation Party (PCN) and the Christian Democrat Party (PDC)—managed to push through a number of constitutional reforms and Supreme Court nominations in a super-extended final session before the 1 May swearing in of the new legislators. However, they were unable to get \$357 million in international loans approved, a vote that the FMLN had not supported because it included no long-term planning for getting El Salvador out of its severe debt crisis.

The FMLN has long been opposed to the ARENA government's irresponsible dependence on international loans. In particular, FMLN legislators have denounced that a disproportional amount of the proposed \$357 million loan is slated for consulting services. During the last week of Apr, social movement organizations were outside the Legislative Assembly to protest the "dirty deal-making going on by ARENA" and its supporters.

In the long-term it is unlikely that the five constitutional reforms approved last week (without the FMLN's votes) will actually take effect, since constitutional reforms require ratification by two different Legislative Assemblies, and as of 1 May the FMLN again has more than one-third of the seats.

The last-minute election of the five Supreme Court judges ensures ARENA's control over what should be more independent governmental bodies. The appointment of nominees for the Salvadoran Supreme Court should not have happened until the end of June, when the current magistrates' mandate ends, but ARENA wanted to avoid having to negotiate with the FMLN in the new legislature. Also, important FMLN-proposed reforms that would improve the electoral process by separating the administrative and

jurisdictional functions of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) and would depoliticize both the TSE and the head of the National Registry of Natural Citizens (RNPN) were not even discussed. Both institutions have been heavily criticized for acting in ARENA's self-interest.

The legislature also approved a known ARENA party activist for the post of Attorney General, Garrid Safie, who has been widely criticized for his lack of independence and experience with the criminal justice system. "ARENA, PCN, PDC and the G-13 [legislators] violated the established process and, after under-the-table negotiations, irregularly and illegitimately elected the Attorney General," reads a FMLN denouncement.

Social movement organizations, civil society groups, court employees and the political opposition have all denounced ARENA for undemocratically securing control of more and more government institutions and for further eroding the rule of law and institutional autonomy.

FMLN Mayors Sign Discount Oil Agreement with Venezuela

On 5 Apr, the Venezuela government signed an agreement with a public, joint-venture company in El Salvador that will allow Salvadorans to benefit from Venezuela's offer of cheaper oil to poor countries or communities, in opposition to US free-market policies. The new company, Alba Petroleos de El Salvador, was started with \$1 million in capital, 60% of which was funded by the Venezuela state oil company PDVSA and the rest by a municipal energy association in El Salvador.

President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela offered this program to the Salvadoran government nearly two years ago, but President Saca was skeptical about the long-term benefits of the plan, and later his cabinet ministers claimed that the Venezuelan government was lying about the offer.

In the absence of Salvadoran government action, the left-wing FMLN created a non-profit entity with the involvement of 16 FMLN mayors and their municipalities, which will deal with the logistics of receiving and distributing the reduced-price oil and gas from Venezuela. One of Venezuela's main stipulations for approving this new oil program with Salvadoran municipalities was that the price reduction be passed on to consumers and that it not remain in the hands of private, transnational oil companies.

It is estimated that this new program will satisfy up to 35% of El Salvador's oil needs, by providing about 100,000 barrels a month. The discounted rate Venezuela offers will allow El Salvador a long-term, low-interest period of 23 years to pay off 40% of the oil purchased. US officials charge that President Chávez is using Venezuela's oil wealth to spread an anti-capitalist and anti-democratic message.

—Clifton L. Holland