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## San Salvador Mayor Loses FMLN Support

by LADB Staff

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San Salvador mayor Hector Silva has decided to put his run at re-election (see NotiCen, 2000-03-16) at risk in an effort to resolve a doctors strike now well into its second month. Health workers walked off the job on Sept. 19 in response to efforts by President Francisco Flores to privatize the nation's health-care system. The strike turned particularly nasty on Oct. 30, when protesters put up blockades across principal highways that brought the capital to a halt and choked off transport throughout the country. Protesters further threatened to escalate the campaign to interrupt the Central American and Caribbean Games scheduled for later this month.

The organization underwriting this threat is Alianza Ciudadana (AC), a coalition of worker, student, and civil organizations. AC director Margarita Posada told the press, "We're not going to march anymore; we're not going into the streets with white flags. El Salvador is going to burn if the government continues supporting this project that we don't want and that could turn out to be a detonating device for a social explosion." This most recent mobilization was spectacularly effective. In the capital, thousands of commuters and students were forced to find their way to their destinations on foot, as traffic stood frozen, while on the highways, blockades and burning tires stopped international traffic to Honduras.

A week prior to this, thousands filled the streets demanding that Flores let stand a legislative decree that would prohibit the privatization of the public-health system, Instituto Salvadoreño del Seguro Social (ISSS). Flores has said he would veto the decree, but he has also called for renewed negotiations with ISSS union representatives. But a meeting between striking workers and Ministro de Trabajo Jorge Nieto failed to produce results, prompting the strikers to send a letter to former US president and Nobel Peace laureate Jimmy Carter requesting that he intercede.

All this was more than Mayor Silva, who is also a physician, was willing to observe from afar. He announced that he would take an active part in an initiative of Flores, a Comision de Seguimiento (CS), to try to end the impasse. "I'm willing to make a personal sacrifice. If this works, it could be necessary to put my candidacy aside," said Silva on Nov. 1. He was not, however, willing to put aside his mayoralty. The commission work will not be a full-time job. Weighing on the decision to proceed or not with his re-election plans is that Silva is a coalition candidate (see NotiCen, 2002-09-12).

One of the parties on whose ticket he is running is the Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN). That party has supported the strikers from the outset and has wholeheartedly embraced their anti-privatization stance. The FMLN is also the principal opposition party in the country (see NotiCen, 1997-04-03). Consistent with its position, the party has come out firmly against the Comision de Seguimiento. A resolution to that effect stated that the CS was "an attempt to co-opt the health workers." The Frente wants the president to solve the problem directly with the health workers and not through "intermediations of any kind."

The resolution was taken up and passed by the Comision Politica, the highest policy-setting group within the party. Silva is a member of that group, but he did not attend the meeting at which this resolution was drawn up. The commission also made clear that Silva had joined Flores' initiative on his own. Silva was also at pains to clarify his position. For him, the ISSS crisis is of such magnitude that "it was absurd to stay on the sidelines. I, like all Salvadorans, see a lot to worry about in the ISSS conflict; it was either keep on with the chaos or look for a solution." The public-health community, meanwhile, has a solution: there will be no retreat. The strike will not end until the decree that prohibits the privatization is published in the *Diario Oficial*, the newspaper of record.

On Oct. 31, President Flores retreated from his promise to veto the legislative decree, but he did not say specifically how or if he might implement a new anti-privatization law. Flores' statement was not good enough for Alcides Gomez, president of the *Asociacion Medica Nacional*. He said that Flores' announcement seemed confused. He told a local reporter, "It was a confused message; he says he's not going to veto, but he doesn't say if he will observe it, or what observation there will be."

Nor did Gomez find much to praise in Silva's entry into the fray. "It is likely a political thing that could muddle what is essentially an issue of the health-care community that we are raising." He said that, while his position coincides with that of the FMLN on the issue, this was not a political fight, but rather one in which the public-health community is representing the interests of the public. "We know best the desperate and bitter situation that Salvadorans live with through lack of health care. At this point we are asking nothing more than that they not privatize health services." "We will dismantle this action when that decree becomes the law of the land," he added. His position was the official position ratified by the *Comision Tripartita*, composed of his group, the *Sindicato de Medicos del Seguro Social*, and the *Colegio Medico*.

This insistence on publication of the decree, etching it in stone, is based on distrust born of experience, explained Guillermo Mata, president of the *Colegio Medica*. "We can't trust the words of anyone," he said, we must have concrete acts and facts, and the only complete expression is the publication [in the *Diario Oficial*]. The doctors remember that, in the past, accords have been signed that have not been respected and that's why now a guarantee is being asked." Turning to Silva's participation, former secretary general of the *Sindicato de Medicos Trabajadores* of the ISSS Ricardo Alfaro said the mayor's participation needed further clarification.

Specifically Alfaro wanted to know if Silva was to be a mediator or an intermediator. The difference, he said, is that a mediator has authority over both parties, while an intermediator is just a messenger. In Alfaro's judgment the process needs neither. They need to negotiate directly with the ultimate decision maker. If that would be Silva's role, then he would be welcome. B

y Oct. 3, squeezed between the FMLN and the public health workers, Silva announced that he was no longer a mayoral candidate for the party. He will run for the office on the tickets of the two remaining parties of the coalition, *Accion Popular (AC)* and *Centro Democratico Unido (CDU)*. He is also supported by the social-democrat organization *Iniciativa Ciudadana*. "I continue being in the [FMLN] party, even though we aren't thinking the same," he said. "I'm no longer a candidate for the FMLN. That is what they have asked, and I accept."

Party spokespersons have denied asking Silva to renounce his candidacy but have confirmed his membership in the FMLN. They said they would seek another candidate for the March 16, 2003, elections.

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