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U.S. Peace Activists Attend Bi-national Peace Conference
Organized By Salvadoran Workers Confederation

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On November 20, I arrived in San Salvador, along with 174 other American activists, to attend a six-day bi-national peace conference organized by the National Union of Salvadoran Workers (Union Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadorenos-UNTS). The UNTS labeled the affair the "In Search of Peace Conference." We traveled in the capital city and surrounding areas to observe and converse with people in schools, refugee centers, orphanages, Indian villages, villages abandoned during aerial bombing raids by the Salvadoran Air Force, the Universidad Nacional, poor neighborhoods devastated by the Oct. 10 earthquake, and the US Embassy "fortress." We spoke with trade union leaders, rural organizers, student activists, human rights workers, slum-dwellers and persons displaced from war zones. Then, on Nov. 22-23 our group joined about 200 Salvadoran delegates at the Universidad Centroamericana to discuss prospects for peace in El Salvador. The conference began with an ecumenical service given by Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomes and his Episcopalian counterpart, Rev. Luis Serrano. Both religious leaders set the tone for debate on the means for ending the seven-year-old civil war. Gomes said, "Justice is the mother of peace." He continued by stating that violence and war are caused by social injustice. The religious declared that violence has never led to peace, and that peace in El Salvador is impossible without achieving social justice. Throughout the ensuing discussions, it was apparent to me that El Salvador's organized workers and peasants are committed to the idea that peace in their country can be realized only through dialogue, or a negotiated settlement between the government/armed forces and the FDR-FMLN (Democratic Revolutionary Front-Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front). A mass movement in the cities and the countryside is underway, organized around the call for a negotiated end to the war which would introduce structural changes in Salvadoran society. Next, Salvadoran peace activists recognize that such a settlement will require political concessions on both sides, but the basic formula for the settlement must be the establishment of a "provisional government of broad participation" in charge of ushering in broad socio-political and economic reforms. It is noteworthy that these reforms are not envisioned to include nationalization of the means of production. The "private sector" will have a role in the provisional government, as will a "purified national army." This conception of a negotiated settlement was echoed again and again by speakers representing UNTS affiliates, and political leaders, including Social Democrat party head Dr. Mario Jordan, and National Conciliation Party (PCN) secretary general, Hugo Carrillo. Carrillo, who is vice-president of the National Assembly, spoke of the need to end the war so that economic development could be resumed. Jordan advocated a "government of national convergence" in which all political, economic and social forces would participate. I was intrigued to observe the PCN traditionally the party of the wealthy in El Salvador issue calls for peace at a conference organized by the country's most powerful urban and rural labor coalition, and based on a formula for peace developed by the FDR-FMLN. Before the conference began, several speakers made it clear that a negotiated settlement will continue to be a fantasy as long as Washington continues its policy of militarizing Central America. US military and economic aid to El Salvador has reached the equivalent of $1.5 million per day. Some 80% of this aid directly or indirectly sustains the government's war against the rebels.
Later, when the speakers addressed the assembly, they said the Reagan administration clearly favors a military solution in El Salvador as opposed to dialogue. They added that the Salvadoran military will never be persuaded to allow a negotiated settlement to the war as long as it continues to benefit from millions of dollars in US military aid. The peace conference received a great deal of media coverage. In addition to negative comments by top government officials, President Jose Napoleon Duarte declared that while the American peace delegation was welcome, any attempt to "disturb the public peace" would be dealt with by the "full weight" of the law. Much publicity was given to our last- minute decision to abstain from participating in the Nov. 22 protest march through downtown San Salvador organized by the UNTS. Thousands of Salvadoran workers from all over the country marched that morning, demanding that the Duarte government immediately resume peace negotiations with the rebels. On Nov. 24, reporters were on hand at the Universidad Centroamericana to record the final resolutions issued by the conference. Briefly, conference participants resolved that there there must be: 1) an end to all U.S. military and economic support for the Salvadoran civil war; 2) dialogue among all parties to the conflict, to include the participation of all sectors of Salvadoran society; 3) freedom for all political prisoners, unconditional respect for human rights and for the organizations that defend them, a full accounting of the disappeared, and freedom from further disappearances; 4) freedom for all persons incarcerated as a result of their work in trade unions and cooperatives; and, 5) a commitment by the Salvadoran government to meet the needs of all earthquake victims, including the distribution of food, medical supplies, clothing, and housing, and to distribute immediately all international aid for earthquake victims in its custody. [Joao Cabral recently completed a masters degree in regional and community planning. He is active in Central America solidarity organizations in Albuquerque, New Mexico.]

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