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Salvadoran Medical Workers Strike Over Salary, Privatization Efforts

by LADB Staff

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The administration of President Francisco Flores and state health workers have been in a struggle since October 1999 over the future of public-health care. At issue are unresolved labor problems left over from strikes in 1998 and recent moves by the administration to turn parts of the state-run Instituto Salvadoreño del Seguro Social (ISSS) over to the private sector. The push to privatize the state health system began in 1989, and when former President Armando Calderón Sol (1994-1999) took office, he promised to step up the process.

Union resistance, however, blunted the drive toward privatization, and officials in the current administration are careful to avoid using the word in connection with ISSS. In May 1998, President Calderón Sol and striking health workers agreed to a settlement that ended a disastrous 25-day doctors' slowdown, which, in turn, was just one of a series of job actions that began in 1997 (see NotiCen, 1998-06-11).

Since the settlement, union leaders say the government has failed to live up to some of the agreements, and they have staged more job actions. "The institution [ISSS] maintains the same health strategies with the clear objective of worsening the crisis and thereby justifying privatization," said a union spokesperson.

In February 1999, the union said ISSS had failed to carry out a list of 22 union demands from the 1998 strike aimed at improving service and that service was worsening every day.

The union says ISSS failed to learn its lesson from the 1997-1998 strikes and continues with its "arrogance." Doctors complain of personnel and material shortages, expired medicines, and long waits for medical treatment.

In recent months, the Flores administration has begun to contract out some ISSS services to private providers. He said this was necessary to ensure that medical needs be taken care of during the present strike by the health-workers union (Sindicato de Trabajadores del Instituto Salvadoreño del Seguro Social, STISSS), which began in October 1999. In November, Flores announced that he would turn over two ISSS hospitals to the private sector and began the process of putting them up for bids.

Flores said the transaction was a concession, not a privatization. He said the concessions would reduce government red tape and improve efficiency. In December, Flores announced that the government would reimburse ISSS patients who go to private doctors. He has also contracted out some peripheral services such as hospital security, catering, and laundry. Critics say this is piecemeal privatization. They insist that privatization has to be legislated, but Flores has skirted

the issue of constitutionality by presenting the incremental changes as administrative, needing no legislation.

Defending the steps taken so far, Flores said the ideal arrangement would be to combine public and private functions. "The state cannot relinquish some things, such as supervising the quality of the service, but other things would obviously be more convenient to have administered by the private sector." Health Vice Minister Gerbert Betancourt said the government's plan was to transform "what we have with new rules [and] modern forms of managing services." STISSS began the current round of strikes in October demanding a wage increase and a promise from the administration not to privatize the system. The strike is now in arbitration, but the privatization issue has clouded the outcome and prompted STISSS to rethink its demands.

Doctors belonging to the Sindicato de Medicos Trabajadores del Instituto Salvadoreno del Seguro Social (SIMETRISSS) joined STISSS strikers Nov. 15. On Dec. 8, protestors from the ISSS unions and some 40 other public-employee unions marched to the presidential residence to deliver a petition against privatization and for salary increases.

Flores said leaders of the Marcha por la Salud y la Unidad disbanded the march 45 minutes before a meeting scheduled for them with presidential advisors. He said it was more a political meeting than a doctors march because participants included students and other nonmedical people who were led by the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN).

The FMLN opposes privatization and Jorge Schafick Handal, FMLN leader in the Legislative Assembly, participated in the march. Rene Zapata, head of the doctors union, said the marchers left because their intention was to speak with Flores, not with his advisors. At the time, Flores was in Miami at a business conference. State workers returned to the streets Jan. 14 to renew the protest and to support the ISSS strikers. The strike was then in its 61st day. [Sources: Notimex, 02/09/99, 11/09/99, 12/07/99, 12/08/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 01/15/00]

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