

Bruised but still kicking

Two years ago a giant new federation of trade unions was formed in El Salvador. DINGA SIKWEBU⁺ describes the struggles and progress of the Salvadorean workers.

In February 1986 a giant was born in El Salvador. The giant is the National Union of Salvadorean Workers (UNTS), a federation of trade union, peasant and student bodies. The birth of this great force marked a new stage in the struggles which are ravaging Salvadorean society.

Since 1979 the Salvadorean government has been locked in a civil war with the Salvadorean liberation movement, the Democratic Revolutionary Front/Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FDR/FMLN). With no end to this civil war in sight, different forces have been working out ways of breaking the stalemate and tipping the balance in their favour.

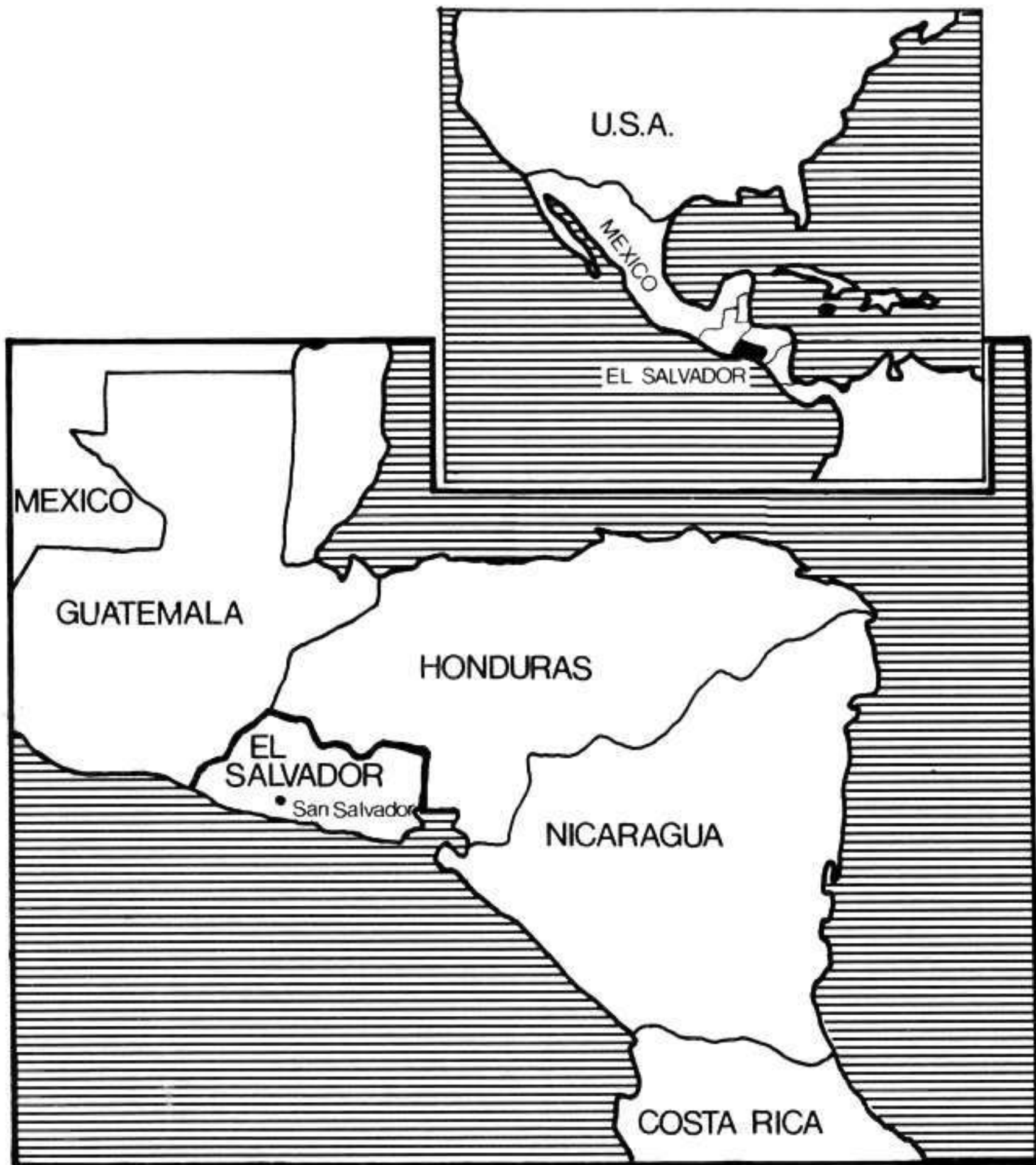
Elected in 1984, and supported by the United States, the Christian Democratic Party government had the task of stopping the civil war. It was elected to mediate between the rightwing oligarchy, a group of four-

teen families who control most of El Salvador's political and economic life, and the progressive forces of the trade unions, people's organisations and FDR/FMLN. But instead of mediating, the Christian Democratic government has found itself isolated and opposed both by the rightwing forces as well as the progressive forces.

The rightwing, which consists of factory bosses and landowners connected to the oligarchy, is supported by the military, which feels the government is soft in dealing with the FMLN guerillas.

In January 1986 the rightwing through their political parties - ARENA and PCN - launched an attack on the Christian Democratic government. The right was protesting against the government's plans of raising taxation for the war effort. These two parties which together hold 27 seats in the 60-seat National

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Assembly, refused to collaborate with the government. Both adopted a "tight lips and folded arms" strategy as they sat quietly in the Assembly during discussion.

At the same time as this protest, the organisation of employers initiated a "bosses strike" in order to put pressure on the government. The bosses paid workers not to

come to work and managed to shut more than 70% of business enterprises.

The civil war has left about 60 000 dead, more than 5 000 missing, and about 1 million displaced. Despite its claim to represent national unity, the inability, of the Christian Democrats to stop this civil war has created great dissatis-

faction amongst the people. President's Duarte's economic policies have increased the dissatisfaction of both the right and the left. To the workers and the middle classes the raising of food, fuel, transport prices and consumer taxes by between 40-50% is unacceptable.

This jostling by both the left and the right has left the Christian Democratic Party government isolated. Workers, peasants and youth realised that the best manner of taking their struggle forward was through building grassroots organisations. This coincided with a new emphasis on the part of the FDR/FMLN on combining armed action with mass mobilisation.

The giant is born

The birth of UNTS was marked by a 50 000-strong demonstration on 21 February 1986 against the government's economic policies. The new federation is the result of a merger between trade unions, agricultural co-operatives, and student organisations. The trade unions include militant unions from the public and private sector, as well as a federation of unions - the UPD - which is assisted by the American Institute of Free Labour Development (AIFLD), which in turn is closely associated with the CIA and therefore with American imperialism. The UPD supported the Christian Democrats in the 1984 elections, but has since broken with

them over their inability to stop the war.

The agricultural co-operatives that have affiliated with UNTS were also linked to the Christian Democrats, but have distanced themselves from the government since the latter has failed to implement the agrarian reform programme. If implemented, this programme would mean access to more land and credit for the co-ops.

The coming together of these organisations under the umbrella of UNTS presented a powerful weapon in the hands of popular opposition to Duarte's government.

UNTS in action

The activities of UNTS over the last two years have mainly been concentrated on two campaigns - the ending of the civil war and the scrapping of the government's economic strategy.

"Dialog Si, Guerra No!"

"Dialogue Yes, War No!"

This chant can be heard in every UNTS rally. In a conference held in July 1986, three months after its launch, UNTS explicitly called for the government to continue dialogue with the FDR/FMLN. According to UNTS the conflict can only be resolved by establishing a transitional government of national unity which will include all the parties from both sides of the conflict.



'Dialogue Yes! War No!': Peace march, San Salvador, October 1985

Photo: Jenny Matthews/Format

UNTS believes such a transitional government would only be able to end the war, if it was committed to the following:

- * Respect for basic human rights.
- * Granting an amnesty to political prisoners and exiles.
- * The right of those displaced by the war to return to their homes.
- * An investigation of past human rights violations.
- * An end to forced conscription.
- * An end to United States interference in El Salvador.

Salvador is not the only country in Central America which is being torn by civil war. Honduras and Guatemala are experiencing civil wars similar to that in Salvador. In Nicaragua the socialist government of the FSLN is under attack by the rightwing Contras backed by the United States. On 7 August last year the Central America Peace Accord or Esquipulas agreement was signed by Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica. With civil wars raging, the accord is an attempt by the Central American states to establish peace in the region. The accord specifies that foreign troops and military support must be withdrawn from the region. It also demands that the signatories of the accord refuse to allow their countries to be used as springboards in attacks directed at other states in the region. It

demands that in the different states where there is internal conflict a process of reconciliation should be initiated.

Although UNTS supports the regional peace initiative, the Federation questions the sincerity of President Duarte in honouring the Peace Accord in El Salvador. According to Miguel Aleman, an UNTS executive member, the Duarte government signed the Accord as an international publicity stunt.

"Our government signs any document ... especially those they can send out to other nations to show their goodwill. But the truth is that here in practice, the contents of those good documents are used in another way. It is a document that speaks of dialogue with the working class, but in actual fact denies all dialogue with workers."

The doubts expressed by UNTS and its affiliates about Duarte's sincerity are not unfounded. Duarte's approach to honouring the Peace Accord in his country has been characterised by the dragging of feet. After establishing a reconciliation commission staffed by known anti-FDR/FMLN elements, Duarte proposed a meeting for 15 September last year. The invitation to the talks was accompanied by a long list of conditions which included a call for the FMLN to lay down its arms and renounce violence.

When the FDR/FMLN rejected these conditions and argued that

they were against the spirit of the Accord, Duarte called off the talks. The talks were resumed by 4 October without Duarte's conditions, after the intervention of Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias, the architect of the Accord.

UNTS's commitment to the resolution of the conflict has not been confined to resolutions. The Federation has backed its demand for peace by flexing its muscles. UNTS workers were out in their thousands demonstrating outside the venue where the 4-5 October peace negotiations were being held.

"Duarte - we won't pay for your war"

This slogan, which was inscribed in a huge banner at the February 1986 launch of the UNTS, captures the connection that the federation makes between the war and the economic problems of El Salvador. According to one of the leaders of UNTS:

"Duarte knows well that every extra *colon*⁺ that goes to pay the workers is one *colon* less to spend on bullets and bombs ..."

For workers it is clear that taxes and prices are being increased to finance the war, not for bettering their conditions. Since the Duarte government came to power in 1984 the living conditions of workers

have deteriorated. Out of an adult population of 2,4 million only 1,7 million have jobs. Two-thirds of those that have employment are casuals without full-time jobs. Prices have increased dramatically. In March last year the government announced a 45% increase in rice, 66% increase in beans and 35% in maize prices. Besides the war, one of the major problems in El Salvador is finding a place to stay. As a result of the war and poverty in the rural areas, one third of the total population of El Salvador is living in San Salvador, the capital city. The majority of those people are living in squatter camps. The housing problem became worse after the October 1986 earthquake which destroyed a quarter of the few existing houses. As a result of the government's failure to provide health and education facilities, most social services are left to the churches and other relief organisations.

It is the government's failure to respond to these problems that has fuelled the UNTS campaign against Duarte's economic policies. The demands of UNTS are:

- * The scrapping of Duarte's economic policies.
- * An economic reconstruction which will begin to solve the 60% unemployment rate.
- * A decent living wage for all workers.

+ *Colon is the money used in Salvador*

* A fundamental and serious land reform programme which will slow the flow of people to the urban areas.

What is exceptional about UNTS is its determination to back these demands with action. Since its formation, no month has gone by without a massive demonstration. These demonstrations have been in support of the federation's demands. Each demonstration has attracted between 50 000 and 80 000 people.

Solidarity action with striking workers has been one of the weapons used by the UNTS unions. In September 1986 a strike wave shook the country as workers came out demanding higher wages and better working conditions. In the last two years strike activity has increased enormously. In 1986 there were about 150 strikes.

Response to UNTS

The responses to the emergence of the UNTS have not only come from workers; youth, peasants and other groups opposed to the Duarte government, have participated in their thousands in UNTS-led campaigns. Since UNTS's founding there has been a lot of rightwing activity directed at the new federation.

The first government response was to support an initiative to form a counter union to UNTS - the National Union of Rural Workers

(UNOC). The government bussed thousands of peasants to San Salvador for a "March for Peace and Democracy" demonstration on 15 March 1986.

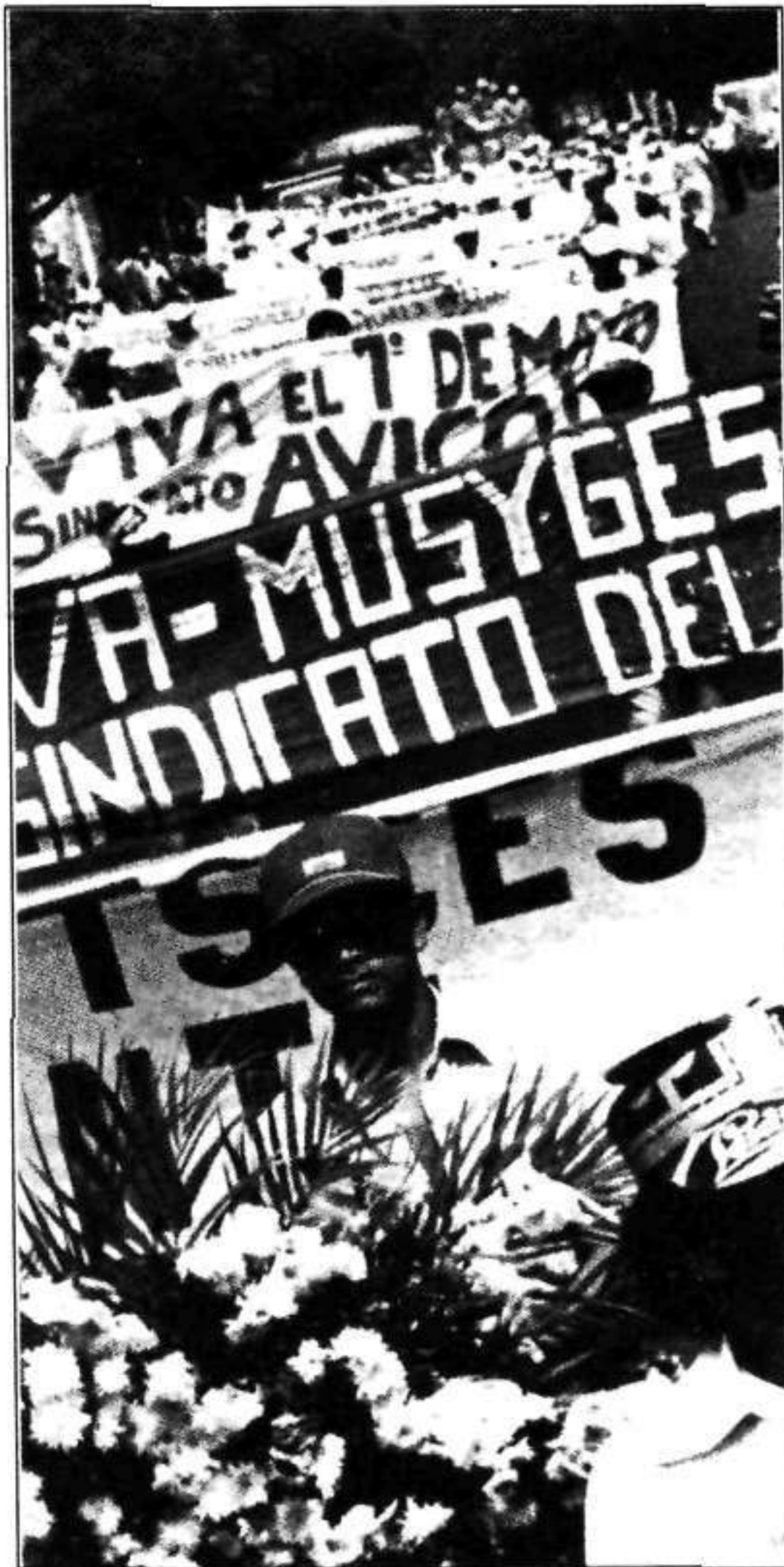
Beside this manipulative response, the State has unleashed its repressive might against UNTS. The persecution of trade unionists is still continuing. In a letter in December 1987 to the Costa Rican President Arias, UNTS mentioned that 18 major human rights violations had occurred since the signing of the Peace Accord on 7 August. These violations have involved arrests of union activists. Union members have also been targets of kidnappings and death squads. As recently as 18 December, a death squad shot and killed Medadro Ayala, an activist of the telecommunications union - AST-TEL, a few metres from the police headquarters in San Salvador. The majority of the 700 political prisoners in El Salvador are union activists.

Strike action is still considered illegal. Although the 1983 Salvadorean constitution allows workers to form trade unions, this right has been severely undermined over the last two years. In most cases workers are locked out or arbitrarily transferred. Their strikes and demonstrations are broken up by the police and the army. In July last year the police opened fire on striking hospital workers, wounding fifteen of them. Settlements that have been agreed are ignored and

militant unions are being replaced with sweetheart and pro-government unions.

The main target of these attacks has been the unions in the public sector. The government is using the 1962 labour code which denies public sector workers the right to form unions. The government has also used a law which allows government departments to transfer public sector workers arbitrarily. These laws have been used to break the power of unions in the public sector. ASTTEL - the telecommunication union has been a victim of these union-bashing practices. In August 1987, the State, which controls the telephone company, decided to break the agreement which they had signed with ASTTEL. The police invaded the workplace and management refused to meet with the worker leaders. Management has meanwhile met with a sweetheart union which has 30 members rather than with ASTTEL which has more than 4880 members.

The government has consistently accused UNTS of being a front for FDR/FMLN. This accusation is backed by the U.S. embassy in San Salvador. Two days before the 1986 UNTS May Day gathering



May First Committee, founding member of UNTS, on the march

Photo: Jenny Matthews/Format

which attracted about 80 000 people, the AIFLD in a press conference produced documents allegedly captured from the FMLN guerillas proving the link between the guerilla movement and UNTS. This accusation is the suspected reason for the withdrawal of one federation nine months after the launch. A leaked U.S. Embassy memorandum implicates AIFLD in efforts to divide UNTS. The views expressed about UNTS in the memorandum were not different from the reasons given by the UPD for its withdrawal. Both claimed that the UNTS was being political. The involvement of AIFLD was again cited after a faction broke away from the 30 000 strong National Peasants Association (ANC) which is affiliated to UNTS.

These attacks on the labour movement have been countered by militant action from workers. On 7 July 1986 a union leader in the textile union, Febe Elisabeth, was arrested. A wave of strikes in 19 factories followed her arrest, with the action culminating in a massive demonstration. On 12 July, after the intervention of President Duarte, she was released. The release of another union activist, Celso Antonio Rivas of COACES, on 1 December was secured by a march of 5 000 people to the presidential residence.

The future of UNTS

UNTS faces many challenges. Its ability to beat back the attack directed at workers and remain a fighting organisation depends on many factors. The future of UNTS depends on the development of the struggle in El Salvador. But the struggle in El Salvador is closely tied to the struggles and wars in Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

Moreover, Central America is on the doorstep of that imperialist monster, the United States. Any attempt to establish peace without effectively stopping U.S. intervention will leave the way open for rightwing coups, military dictatorship and civil war.

All of these national, regional and international factors will define the options open to UNTS. But UNTS is not simply a pawn of regional and international forces. Already UNTS has taken great steps in the struggle of the workers to decide their future. Together with other progressive forces in El Salvador, in other countries in the region, and in the U.S., UNTS has the potential to play a big role in resolving the war which ravages the country. Its role in this process will determine the future of the working people of El Salvador.

Confrontation shows Salvadorean government is taking stronger action against unions

Trade unionists occupy the Ministry of Labour, demanding an increase in minimum wages and freedom for trade unions. JULIA SHIPP reports⁺.

A confrontation between Salvadorean unionists and the Minister of Labour is the most recent evidence that the government of El Salvador is taking stronger measures against the growing labour movement in that country. The confrontation also showed that the Salvadorean labour movement, and its allies in U.S. labour, will not stand idly by in the face of government attacks.

On March 10, 60 Salvadorean workers forcibly entered the Ministry of labour in San Salvador. The

workers, who are members of the National Union of Salvadorean Workers (UNTS), were demanding: a raise in the minimum wage; effective control of the prices of basic necessities; respect for the freedom of unions and an end to the massive firings of workers; the demilitarization of many workplaces; and solutions to ongoing labour conflicts. The UNTS is a broad coalition that includes most of the progressive Salvadorean unions and many student and community organisations.

When the workers entered the Ministry, labour Minister Lazaro Tadeo Bernal refused to meet with them. Instead, he declared the action an "occupation" and summoned his bodyguards.

With the help of the guards, Bernal fled the building, escaping to a nearby military installation. In the process, the Minister was bruised and cut on the face, Bernal claims that he was attacked by five workers. The workers deny this and say that he was hit by a chair thrown by one of his own guards.

The Ministry was then surrounded by armed soldiers and the airforce, leaving the workers trapped. Later that afternoon, Salvadorean President Jose Napoleon Duarte and labour Minister Bernal ordered the arrest of five of the workers involved in the action. The five

⁺ This article is reprinted from *Labor Notes*, No. 110, May 1988

are leaders of hospital, banking, textile and confectionery unions.

The UNTS tried to arrange a way out of the building for the trapped workers so that they would not be captured or attacked. It organised about 70 more workers to go the Ministry in the hope that all the workers together would form a group large enough to put off an attack.

However, this second group was stopped by the airforce, searched, and beaten. Humberto Centeno, general secretary of the telecommunications workers union, ASTTEL, and a UNTS executive committee member, was severely beaten. He was charged with "assaulting a security officer", but eyewitnesses - including a delegation of U.S. citizens - have stated that the attack on Centeno was unprovoked.

Tortured

Centeno was taken to airforce headquarters where he was apparently tortured. Although in critical condition, he was then taken to a hospital under heavy armed guard.

Despite the dispersal of the sec-

ond group of workers, the group inside the Ministry managed to negotiate a bus and finally leave the Ministry accompanied by Archbishop Rosa Chavez.

On March 11, between two and three thousand workers marched in San Salvador to demand Centeno's release and to reiterate their demands of the previous day. The U.S. labour and solidarity movements also responded to the attack on Centeno with letters and protests. A second march took place the following day.

On March 12, although unable to leave his hospital bed, Centeno was freed and charges against him were dropped.

But the story does not end here. There are still orders to arrest the five unionists involved in the action at the Ministry. These unionists are trying to build support and arrange for the orders to be rescinded. The UNTS is also planning more protests in order to protect the unionists and to press for the workers' demands.

Until there are labour and human rights in El Salvador, the story will not end.