



# WAR AGAINST PEOPLE AND ENVIRONMENT

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**O**N NOVEMBER 10 1989 the eve of El Salvador's recent insurrection, Guillermo Ungo, leading member of the Salvadoran political opposition, was meeting with EPOCA staff on the environmental crisis in El Salvador. It seems an odd juxtaposition that El Salvador's opposition leadership would occupy themselves with problems of ecological deterioration as they prepared for the biggest armed offensive in ten years. And yet, it is one of several clear signs that the popular opposition has come to see the health of El Salvador's land to be inseparable from the health of its people.

From El Salvador's history of human and environmental exploitation has emerged a strong popular movement, including political leaders, farmers, union workers, and environmentalists who make a clear case for a popular notion of environmentalism that speaks fundamentally to human suffering and to the range of class, race,

and gender issues which are at the root of environmental destruction.

The war in El Salvador is being waged against the people and the environment. Supported with billions of dollars of military and "development" aid from the United States, the current government is pursuing ecological suicide which will soon translate into economic suicide. El Salvador's limited wealth is based almost exclusively on the country's most precious resource: land. Through a combined strategy of expanding agro-export production and warfare, the U.S. is funding the wholesale destruction of this resource and of El Salvador's only other major resource: its people. Control over these two resources are at the heart of the Salvadoran people's struggle for social change.

Guillermo Ungo says, "We see that the ecological crisis is one of the main problems [in our country]: we are killing our ecosystem in the short term, not even the long term." For this reason the environment cannot be, and is not, considered a tangential issue for the

popular movement in El Salvador. They are keenly aware that their political success will be meaningless if there is no topsoil or unpoisoned water left in the country after decades of wholesale destruction.

According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, El Salvador is the most environmentally degraded country in Latin America. Over 95 percent of El Salvador's original forest cover has been destroyed and less than 7 percent of the country has tree cover. Due partly to this deforestation and partly to the continued growth of soil-eating export agriculture, serious soil erosion now affects 83 percent of El Salvador's land. Sustainable rates of topsoil loss are about one inch every hundred years: in El Salvador, the topsoil is washing and blowing away at the rate of one and a half inches yearly. Once mobile, this soil runs down hillsides into rivers and reservoirs, clogging hydroelectric dams, jeopardizing potable water supplies, and endangering aquatic ecosystems. Further, floods, and in the dry season



—TALLER FOTOGRAFICO TACACHIHUA YAPALI

drought, are becoming increasingly common due to the soils inability to retain water.

While many "big ten" environmentalists look to poor "ignorant" farmers slashing and burning the forests as a primary cause of environmental destruction, few are looking to the U.S. policies which have consistently funded a development model which, while profitable to U.S. suppliers and to a few Salvadoran elites, has forced an impoverished rural majority to eke out a living on steep hillsides and in shallow-soiled forests.

Salvadoran peasants are locked in a cycle of over-cultivation of inadequate land, leading to decreasing yields, more intense cultivation of the same exhausted piece of earth, and ultimate displacement to a new, equally-unfit plot of land. Ecological refugees are now added to the population of economic and war refugees lacking land, employment, or any means of survival.

Also related to large scale agro-export production is the poisoning of land and people from the unregulated use of toxic pesticides. Hundreds of Salvadoran workers are poisoned each year, with pesticides banned in the U.S. and Europe but supplied by Germany's

Bayer and the U.S. Monsanto corporations. Cotton, long the most pesticide intensive crop, may soon be replaced, with help from USAID, by "non-traditional" crops (broccoli, snow peas, melons, ornamentals, and more) as the leading cause of pesticide contamination of workers, fisheries, mangrove swamps, and waterways along the Pacific coastal region of the country.

Without any legal protection from the abuse of pesticides, agricultural workers face totally unsafe conditions. As one leader from the National Association of Farmworkers (ANTA) stated, "The owners think of their own interest and not the interests of the workers. So even if a different kind of pesticide application would be safer, the owner won't adopt it if there are cheaper ways for them to spray. In El Salvador there aren't any protective laws for workers with regard to pesticides and other workplace conditions." Aggravating the situation is the fact that many workers live in shacks right alongside the fields, often bathing and drinking from irrigation ditches and streams filled with toxic pesticide runoff. In the last ten years, cancer rates have nearly tripled from 4,000 to 11,000 cases annually.

Problems of water contamination do not stop with pesticides. It is estimated that only one in ten Salvadorans has access to safe drinking water. With an administration that focuses on serving the needs of the wealthy, sanitation doesn't extend much beyond the few elite neighborhoods of San Salvador. Sewage systems reach only 15 percent of the rural and 38 percent of the urban population. The remaining waste finds its way into water systems, or into dumps inappropriately placed near water sources. As a result, diarrhea and waterborne diseases are a leading cause of infant death.

Ungo adds, "And then we have the additional important cause of ecological deterioration: the war.... Certain ecological groups in El Salvador, especially from the upper classes, don't want to consider that the war exists in El Salvador, despite the ecological problems it causes, because if they take the war into account they are taking a political stand. But really, in El Salvador, the political aspects to the ecological crisis are the most important, the determining factors if you will, are the war, the structure of wealth, and the pattern of land tenure. So, ecologically

speaking, the first thing that we have to do is put an end to war."

Concurring with Ungo, one of El Salvador's leading ecologists (who will remain nameless for safety issues) indicates: "The principal environmental problem that we have is the war. Destruction of forests by military activity—bombing and burning, burning mostly—in the last two years, destroyed approximately 1,200 hectares of forest in this manner. In order to prevent guerilla occupation of the land, the army totally eliminates the vegetation on the highest part of the mountains in order to observe with helicopters, but the highest part is the most fragile ecologically. Last year there was a huge landslide from a volcano near the Gulf of Fonseca which killed more than 30 campesinos below. Investigators determined that the cause of the landslide was that the army had cleared this highest level of vegetation."

"Scorched earth" tactics have become common in the ten-year-old war being waged by the military against the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). In addition to forest burning, the military burns and destroys field after field, kills livestock, and smashes storage containers filled with harvest to insure that potentially sympathetic farmers aren't feeding the rebels. Vast areas of Morazan, Cabanas, and Chalatenango provinces have been devastated by the bombing and fires used as part of the military strategy.

The spiral of poverty, ecological destruction, more poverty, and more ecological destruction is common to much of the Third World. But in El Salvador, the presence of the U.S.-financed war adds a heavy weight to an already unbalanced ecological scale. The development model currently being pursued by the United States since World War II in El Salvador and in the rest of Central America, fueled by intensive exploitation of resources and people, is a system necessarily maintained only by brute force.

"It is 'savage capitalism.' We over-exploit not just humans but the earth. ARENA is ruling the country now. They are the best expression of this savage capitalism," says Ungo. Leading economists from the savage capitalism school of economics at the University of Chicago (including Arnold Harberger) and other right-wing advisors



This is the cloud-soft cotton of El Salvador—brought from boll to bale with the help of worldwide Citibank.

from Fundacion Chile and Argentina now have a direct line to those who engineer ARENA's new economic policies. FUSADES (Salvador Foundation for Social and Economic Development), according to sources in and out of the Salvadoran government, has become the Bohemian Grove of El Salvador. Not coincidentally, FUSADES receives 90 percent of its funding from USAID: this support represents two-thirds of all money that USAID spends on Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) in the country (*Christian Science Monitor*).

With El Salvador's new president Alfredo Cristiani as a founding member of the group and four more members in Cristiani's cabinet, FUSADES is sure to have ears in the government. In fact, the emergency austerity economic measures put into practice days after ARENA took office were pulled directly from a FUSADES report. This new economic package included key recommendations such as: a rollback of the agrarian reform plan; privatization of the lands as well as the banks; cuts in government spending; lower trade barriers; and the promotion of non-traditional export crops.

Perhaps the most significant of these policy recommendations being implemented by the ARENA government is the reversal of the limited land reform begun in the early 1980s. Says a Salvadoran ecologist: "Unfortunately, the real problem related to conservation, or actually we are talking about restoration in this country, is the issue of land tenure. Because of this we are very worried about the policy of the government which favors the return of the lands to the [previous] landowners." In 1980, a U.S.-funded and directed land reform was initiated. Unfortunately the program's intention was simply to quell a growing peasant movement, not to fundamentally redistribute wealth nor production priorities.

The program had three phases. In phase I, a few large estates were broken up and distributed. The oligarchy slowed this process, and prevented the carrying out of the second phase, which would have broken up the coffee estates. In phase III, peasants who were farming small plots were given title to their land under the Land to the Tiller program.

The lands given out under this final phase were the most marginal lands on



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steep erosion-prone hillsides. By titling the peasants to these unfit lands the government essentially gave up nothing and yet claimed land reform. Ecologically speaking, this phase of the program was a disaster. In an unabashed display of the oligarchy's control of the new government, the Supreme Court in recent months evicted over two dozen peasant cooperatives that received land from the break up of some large estates during the now shelved land reform. The cooperative land was returned to the former owners, and the Supreme Court has many cases scheduled for review.

With their land repossessed, campesinos have three choices: be forced back onto marginal forested lands (where they face poor yields and create further ecological problems); work the export crop fields of feudal landowners for a small wage; or become refugees in San Salvador.

The repossessed lands are not being used for food production but for pesticide-intensive crops that benefit the small elite and deepen the cycle of poverty, environmental destruction, and rebellion that has characterized land tenure relations in El Salvador for decades. The ARENA government is justifying the land take-backs, arguing that the new campesino cooperatives are not making payments on their

debts—debts they were forced to acquire to compensate the previous landowners. USAID says that 95 percent of the cooperatives are unable to pay even the interest on their debts. The country's 500 cooperatives owe \$800 million to landlords.

Additionally, in phase I of the land reform, some idly-held non-productive forest lands were distributed to the National Park Service. Explains one Salvadoran environmentalist, "We are strongly involved with agrarian reform because we are working on a plan for National Protected Areas that is based principally—80 percent—in the lands that were appropriated under the first phase of the agrarian reform. These lands, 32,000 hectares more or less wild, represents more than half of the natural forests that we have. For us it is essential that these lands be managed as protected areas under different management options, not just from the point of view of preservation of resources but in terms of sustainable use. [The plan would] integrate cooperatives into the management of these areas, because the cooperatives benefit from the sustained use of these areas in terms of firewood, and water. And nobody has said a word about this loss of phase I lands."

In the face of strong social and political dimensions to the environmental crisis, our Salvadoran colleague in-

dicates, "the majority of the environmental NGO's in the country have a preservation attitude toward the issues. They make calls to 'not touch' and 'don't intervene' in nature. This is a philosophy which has been imported into our country. It is not really our own. It has nothing to say regarding the real necessities of preserving a healthy environment for the people. If we continue to have this attitude we will be very far from having a real conservation solution to the crisis of our country."

He continues: "Environmental NGO's from outside the region have had extensive influence in the region. The types of projects they support are more preservationist. But when you talk with them about how to involve the people, the cooperatives of campesinos for the production of firewood, for example, you don't get very far. Organizations like the World Wildlife Fund (US) and the Nature Conservancy are substituting for the role of USAID in many instances. They continue to think that the only way to solve problems is to give money."

This 'apolitical' preservationist approach has roots in the development of the U.S. environmental movement, which, reflecting the priorities of its leaders, (largely affluent, white and male), makes it unequipped to respond

to the political or economic causes of environmental destruction in the Third World or at home. Emerging in the late 19th century as an upper class movement to preserve pristine wilderness in the U.S. and after WWII as a more middle class movement, it has not challenged the class, race, and gender structures or economic policies which have directed the profitable pillage of nature.

The result of this history has been a powerful alliance of conservation groups focused on legislative reform, single issue campaigns, and largely modelled after the corporate management structure of the industries they are trying to regulate. The emphasis on regulation and legislation, along with an historical class bias, has meant a stronger identification with the polluters than with those disenfranchised sectors who suffer the impacts of "savage capitalism."

The recent hopeful exception to this pattern has been the emergence of the growing multi-racial, multi-class grassroots anti-toxics movement in the U.S. It draws its strength from the Black, Latin, and poor White urban activists and is attempting to bridge the historic jobs/environment split. Organizations such as the National Toxic Campaign, the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, the Highlander Center, and hundreds of local groups are working to build coalitions of labor, environmental, and health workers rather than extract short-term regulatory compromises from behind-the-scenes power lunches with industry executives and government leaders. These relatively new players have yet to have a significant impact, however, on the tenor of mainstream environmentalism in the U.S. and as it is exported to the Third World.

When turned on the Third World, the "apolitical" approach of the U.S. environmental behemoths translates into strategies of conservation which do not challenge the fundamental political and economic structures which are destroying people and the environment. A classic example of the lack of understanding on the part of U.S. environmental groups translate into eco-racism.

The environmental movements almost obsessive focus on overpopulation as the primary cause of environmental destruction in the Third World misses the big picture completely.

For more conservative groups, this analysis becomes an escape from addressing the more politically loaded issues of land reform, access to education, health care, workers right to organize to protect themselves from harmful practices, access to credit and the decision making process. More park preserves and debt for nature swaps, do not deal with the expansion of export agriculture which is forcing peasants further into the forest to grow food nor do they deal with the worsening debt crisis.

Salvadoran peasants, and religious and community leaders are not so confused about the roots of environmental destruction in their country. A Salvadorean environmentalist comments, "I believe that conservationists must together with trade unions, with campesino associations, and with the workers of the country, find points of agreement, and look for shared aspirations with workers and peasants and the great majority of interests that we claim to represent."

This broader vision includes a call for total economic conversion from a war economy to a restoration economy. According to a recent report on ecology by Salvadoran environmentalists, some have proposed as a way to fund ecological transformation (not preservation) "that the powers that have maintained this state of war in our country for so many years, trying their strength in our territory and investing huge sums in conflict—each one must contribute this money invested in ten years of war, as just compensation for the material and moral damages to the Salvadorean people."

Ungo adds, "this is a question for the Democratic Convergence. I think we cannot solve this ecological crisis by ourselves, but we can contribute by beginning to deal with the ecological crisis step by step. First of all, we have to have a peaceful settlement to the war. Without peace there is no chance of dealing with the problems of ecology. Second, we are trying to form a popular and democratic alternative: not minority out for the minority or oligarchy for the oligarchy. The Convergence favors land reform as a necessary step for handling the ecological crisis."

As progressive movements in other parts of the world make environmental concerns central to their agendas for so-

cial change, the U.S. left will be called on to develop sound responses to the environmental crisis. The political experience and analysis of the left in this country is needed now more than ever to transform the meaning of environmentalism and to bring environmental solidarity, not eco-imperialism, to those struggling for a peaceful, just, and sustainable future. Z

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