

## REPORT: LATINO POLITICS

the Salvadoran election without direct grassroots pressure. In this way, Salvadoran organizations and the Salvadoran-focused solidarity movement have demonstrated an impressive organizational capacity, and they have several reasons to be optimistic, especially about their ability to grow and become even more effective.

**T**HE FIRST AND PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR in the growth and strength of organizations like CISPES, SHARE, SANA, Central America Resource Center (CARECEN), and the FMLN Base Committees is the renewed energy that a new generation of Salvadoran activists has brought to them. Many of these organizations now have among their leadership young Salvadorans with a strong connection to their ancestral homeland and a clear sense of the origins of their or their parents' migration to the United States. That trend is likely only to increase, as Salvadoran-born but U.S.-raised Salvadorans (known as the "1.5 generation"), as

well as U.S.-born Salvadorans (the second generation), come of age.

A second factor is the creation and exponential growth of USEU—a student group founded in 2005 at the University of El Salvador—across California universities. The first statewide organization providing a space for Salvadoran students, this organization is playing a major role in politicizing and mobilizing young Salvadorans, and has the potential to provide Salvadoran and Salvadoran-solidarity organizations with a ready-made population of cadre and activists, both in the United States and El Salvador. In 2007, several U.S.-born or -raised Salvadoran university students traveled to participate in the São Paulo Forum, a conference of leftist political parties begun in Brazil, which was held in San Salvador that year. At the conference they met USEU's founders, and after returning they decided to start their own chapter of the organization at Cal State Los Angeles and Long Beach City College.

## Latinos and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Lesson for the Future

**D**uring El Salvador's 2003–04 presidential campaign season, ads appeared on Salvadoran televisions featuring U.S. Republican congressional representatives Tom Tancredo (Colo.), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Fla.), and Lincoln Diaz-Balart (Fla.). Praising the right-wing ARENA party candidate Tony Saca, who eventually won the election, the U.S. officials warned Salvadoran voters that a victory by the left-wing opposition party, the FMLN, would result in their U.S.-based relatives being deported and their remittances being cut off. This was no small matter: Salvadorans in the United States send home about \$2 billion each year, keeping the country's economy afloat. Meanwhile, Bush administration diplomats like Roger Noriega and Otto Reich, together with Florida governor Jeb Bush, made press statements reinforcing the message that U.S. relations with El Salvador would go sour if FMLN candidate Schafik Handal won the presidency. To further make the point, the rabidly anti-immigrant Tancredo introduced legislation to cut Salvadoran remittances in the event of an FMLN victory.

In light of the 2004 experience, the Salvadoran American National Association (SANA), an L.A.-based group founded in 1999 by labor and immigrant rights leaders, decided not only to participate as electoral observers in El Salvador's 2009 presidential election but also to pressure the U.S. government to remain neutral. SANA

helped mobilize various sectors from the Salvadoran community in Washington and the surrounding tri-state area (the largest Latino group in the region, at an estimated half million), drawing on the community's long tradition of activism. Previous organizational and movement-building experiences, coupled with the strong presence of Salvadorans in the U.S. capital, allowed SANA to help establish a more accountable U.S. foreign policy toward El Salvador.

We reached out to both members of the U.S. government and to civil society. Salvadoran leaders met with key congressional representatives—including members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, and the Hispanic Caucus, and especially those who represented significant Salvadoran constituencies. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, felt strongly about the remittance issue as the representative of one of the country's largest Salvadoran constituencies, and promised he would do what he could. The congressman sent an aide to El Salvador to release a powerful press statement on his behalf, assuring the Salvadoran electorate that the flow of remittances would not be jeopardized. SANA also identified a monumental ally, Congressman Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), who circulated an open letter to Obama urging his support for free and fair elections in El

From then on the organization expanded rapidly, first in southern and then in northern California. In fewer than three years, USEU has not only managed to open chapters statewide but has organized two statewide conferences; the first, held at UCLA, drew just under 200 students. The second annual statewide conference, titled “Paradigms of a New Consciousness: (Re)defining the Salvadoran Diaspora in the 21st Century,” was attended by almost 300 students from throughout California. The organization’s statewide conferences were the first to address several issues facing the Salvadoran population and its solidarity organizations. They consisted of workshops in which students, activists, and community members discussed the need to reconceptualize Salvadoran identity based on a transnational conception of nation, how to advocate for immigrants rights, how to heal the (inter-generationally displaced) traumatic effects of the civil war, how to improve academic achievement, and how to recover the community’s historical memory.

Student organizations like USEU have the potential to play a vital role in the growth of the Salvadoran transnational movement. At the same time, because young Salvadorans in the diaspora are organically linked to both Salvadoran and U.S. struggles, USEU provides a space to address the community’s most pressing issues regardless of geographic location. Thus, the organization has at different times taken on Salvadoran- and Latin American-focused causes, such as stopping U.S. interference in the Salvadoran presidential election, supporting the anti-mining movement in El Salvador, and opposing the coup in Honduras. It has also taken on U.S.-based causes such as fighting for immigrants’ rights (e.g., mobilizing against Arizona’s SB 1070), helping re-register Salvadorans to TPS, and supporting the work of Homies Unidos (a gang prevention and intervention group), especially its charismatic leader Alex Sanchez.

USEU has also adopted tactics similar to those used by solidarity organizations, including taking delega-

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Salvador. Salvadoran Americans came to the capital from California, Massachusetts, Texas, New York, Washington, and Virginia to urge members of Congress to add their signatures to the letter to Obama. Twenty-seven representatives and one senator signed on, including the chair of the Hispanic Caucus, Nydia Velázquez (D-N.Y.).

Beyond the federal government, SANA reached out to Salvadoran American allies in the labor movement, including executive board members of SEIU Local 1877, 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, and AFSCME 3299. Local elected officials, Salvadoran business owners, faith leaders, and academics also joined the campaign. SANA also held press conferences in Los Angeles, Washington, and San Salvador, where we released statements by U.S. Congress members like Berman and Xavier Becerra (D-Calif.) denying that remittances would be cut off in the event of an FMLN victory. The letter to Obama was also circulated. Targeting the media in the United States and El Salvador was crucial, enabling us to reach the electorate in El Salvador and their families in the United States.

Three days before the March 15 election, the Obama administration announced that it would work with any candidate elected by the people of El Salvador. The day after the statement was released, U.S. Ambassador Robert Blau met with both candidates, the meeting made national headlines just one day before the election. It was a huge setback for

the Salvadoran right. The FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes would go on to win the presidency by 2.6% of the vote. While other factors may have led to the Obama administration’s decision to take a position on the Salvadoran election, our efforts show that organized Latinos can influence U.S. policy toward Latin America. This experience could inform efforts on other international issues that affect Latinos.

For example, Latinos in the United States could join the movement against the United States’ militarized approach to drug enforcement under such programs as the Merida Initiative, which has exacerbated violence in Mexico. They could also pressure the U.S. government to renegotiate DR-CAFTA, which has made it possible for a Canadian mining company with a U.S. subsidiary to launch a \$200 million lawsuit against El Salvador for rejecting its mining application. NAFTA could also be targeted, linking the fight against corporate globalization to immigration reform—after all, “free trade” has devastated the Mexican economy and forced millions of people to migrate to the United States. For this reason, Latinos must begin to take on foreign policy issues if there is ever going to be a solution to the so-called immigration problem—U.S. foreign policy is largely responsible for displacing people in Latin America in the first place.

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