

RVO In El Salvador 1978

In June 1978 I was asked by the American Institute For Free Labor Development (AIFLD-AFL-CIO) to join a 3-man delegation that AFL-CIO President George Meany was sending to El Salvador. The AIFLD had been working in El Salvador with labor unions, especially the construction union SUTC, and campesinos (landless and very small tenant farmers) from the mid 1960s until its expulsion from El Salvador in 1972 due to pressure on the GOES (Government of El Salvador) by the large agricultural landlords (tierra tenientes). Since then AIFLD had sent in limited funds to assist the Salvadoran Communal Union (Union Comunal Salvadorena or UCS) carry out education programs, build up their cooperatives and allow the UCS Executive Board Members to mobilize from their home bases.

The UCS had been under pressure from the military government and their allies from the landlord ruling class to accept financing from the GOES and become a part of the right wing political structure. As it did not accept this, UCS members found themselves being evicted from the tiny plots of land they rented; and UCS cooperatives were either being denied production loans or finding that their loans arriving very late in the planting season which created much greater risk of crop failure. One cooperative put in for a loan to plant But only got enough money to plant Not only were they supposed to feed their families, create future investment in the coops but also make a yearly mortgage payment for their land that the government had arranged to be sold to them at a higher than real market price. As these payments fell short, the GOES complained that the coop was not serious about its obligations and therefore, putting its future control of the land in doubt.

All around El Salvador was spiraling into chaos as communist guerrillas kidnapped and killed prominent citizens, creating a \$50 million war chest and right wing goon squads (Orden) and the GOEs' paramilitary police forces used violence and assassination against anyone or organization that they saw as opposition. It did not matter that the organization like UCS believed in the creation of a real democratic regime.

Brother Meany's telegram read something as follows: To President .. Romero, GOES. It has come to our attention that your government is denying credit and applying violence (assassinations, evictions etc) against campesino organizations and their members. It is intolerable that the GOES refuses to allow freedom of association and the right of peasant to own their own land and work it in peace. I, therefore, am sending an AFL-CIO team to speak with you and your government on these human rights violations and ways to correct them. George Meany, President, AFL-CIO.

Romero was furious and refused to meet with the team. A council of ministers did meet with us and wasted our time with half truths, some lies and extraneous explanations and information that had nothing to do with the rights violations campesinos were experiencing. In this team was Sam Haddad, a Steel Worker and a regional director for AIFLD, Andy McClellan, member of the AFL-CIO's International Department with responsibilities for Latin America and the Caribbean and Michael Hammer, an AIFLD Country Director most responsible for helping the UCS organize and Director of the AIFLD's Agrarian Union Department (AUDD) and myself as the note taker and information gather. The readers of this Newsletter have heard of Michael Hammer before. He was one of the three trade unions assassinated by national guardsmen, acting as a death squad, in the Sheraton Hotel on Jan. 3, 1981. Andy was a very well respected US trade unionist in Latin America. He helped the Honduran labor movement build itself into a powerful pressure group, after the huge 1954 strikes, in favor of better living standards, social and labor legislation and creating more democratic forms of government and community living. In his early years Andy had worked as a cowboy vaccinating cattle against hoof and mouth disease in Mexico. You talk about hard work and living at the level of the poorest Mexican!

But what was my role? I was the junior member of the team and charged with getting together all possible information on the situation for the team before they met with the GOES. The UCS leaders told me all sorts of stories – true stories – of their struggle with the government and the armed forces; but the process to get specific information on what happened in x coop, when, who was involved etc was like pulling teeth from a hen. Campesinos did not think in terms of a well

orchestrated judicial presentation, backed up by well defined facts, that Hammer wanted. Fortunately, the stories they told did contain much valuable information; and I was able to give Hammer what I thought was a good case. I told Mike that the Ministers and government officials would not be prepared to refute our information as was the case. We marched into a long session of with ...

At the end of our non conversation with the, Sam announced that I would be staying behind to work with the UCS on different issues, including their primitive accounting and financial management systems. The question of a large scale agrarian reform did not come up in the conversations, even though 18 months later there was a massive redistribution of land through a government born out of a military coup. How do we help the UCS maintain their independence from an onslaught of government intervention attempts, the increasing intimidation and murder by government associated forces in the countryside and a US Embassy under an old style ambassador that did not understand the urgency for new policy directions. We did. I know that Hammer certainly had this premonition of an El Salvador sliding into greater violence and chaos and perhaps civil war. Extremely few people understood and FELT El Salvador as Michael Peter Hammer did.

A New York Times magazine article from Sept. 10, 1978 described this descent into hell taking place in El Salvador.