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Mass Strikes in El Salvador Prompted by Attempts to Privatize Health Care

In response to an attempt by President Flores to push through legislation that would lay the groundwork for the privatization of El Salvador's public health care system, doctors and health workers at major public hospitals have organized a massive strike that has gripped the country for over a month. They have vowed to continue the strike, which has been accompanied by street protests and which is generating support from a broad array of civil society groups, until President Flores signs a decree passed by the Salvadoran legislature on October 17 which would prohibit any form of health care privatization and which affirms the state responsibility to preserve the health care of its citizens as a public good. On October 23, more than 100,000 people marched in San Salvador to pressure President Flores to sign the decree. This mass social mobilization is the largest in the country since the peace accords were signed in 1992.

President Flores and his ARENA party's efforts to privatize the nation's health care system can best be understood in the context of the government's preparations for upcoming negotiations of a free trade agreement with the U.S. (Central American Free Trade Agreement - CAFTA) and the President's desire to make the country more attractive to foreign investors.

The health care strike is viewed by a number of Salvadorans, and others throughout Central America, as a crucial test of the capacity of citizen movements to challenge the imposition of economic policies which prioritize the interests of foreign investors over national governments' obligations to protect the well-being of their citizens. A broad-based civil society coalition in El Salvador is calling on organizations abroad to demonstrate their solidarity with the striking workers.

On October 31, President Flores made a surprise announcement that he would appoint Hector Silva, the current mayor of San Salvador and long-time FMLN politician, as the coordinator of a commission which would work to mediate between the administration and striking medical workers in order to bring the strike to an end. While Flores' move could represent an indication that the striking workers have succeeded in pressuring him to concede on this issue, the coordinators of the mobilization are not celebrating yet. Flores has yet to name other members of the commission or explain precisely what its role would be in relationship to striking workers. The medical workers union and civil society organizations supporting them have stated they will reject the Mayor's mediation until the President signs the Decree and withdraws his current legislative proposals regarding health care reform.

