

# **We Are Not Terrorists! Organizing IS Democracy! 2007 CISPES Fall Tour**

## **Speaker Biography: Ricardo Calderon**

Ricardo Calderon is a Salvadoran unionist with a long history of militant organizing. He was born on October 31, 1959, in San Salvador, and has spent his entire life in the capital. As a union leader, his birth date was prophetic in that October 31 is El Salvador's "Day of the Unionist." He works for the Alumbrado Electric Company of San Salvador which, as a result of the Energy Industry's 1997 privatization, is now a subsidiary of the U.S. company AES. In 1981, Ricardo joined the Electric Industry Union of El Salvador (SIES). This union represents Electrical workers from the entire country and is a member of FESTRAPES, the Public Employees' Union Federation of El Salvador, and CSTS, the Union Confederation of Workers in El Salvador. Through this involvement and a partnership with the Salvadoran Union Front (FSS), Ricardo has a wide knowledge of union issues in El Salvador.



His work with the FSS focuses on strengthening the union movement through unity in actions and proposals, such as an increase in the national minimum wage. The FSS is accompanying the movement to demand the ratification of Conventions 87 and 98 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) and their proper application once enacted into law. They are also building coalitions to create new unions in the private, public, and municipal sectors.

Ricardo notes three main problems that impede union organizing efforts in El Salvador. The first he describes as general anti-union conduct on the part of companies, noting that most simply fire workers when they begin to organize. The second is the Labor Ministry, which responds more to large business interests than to workers or the people. The third obstacle he emphasizes is the fear that people have to identify themselves as unionists or as aligned with union organizing.

These fears are intensified by the broad repression the government is exerting against the social movement and union organizers. In recent months, union members have been intimidated and arrested for opposing the privatization of health care and water, and Miguel Angel Vasquez Argueta of the STSEL electrical workers union was murdered on July 18. The ARENA government is utilizing the highly controversial Anti-Terrorism Law and the newly reformed Penal Code to criminalize common protest tactics and silence political dissent.

In response to this, the FSS and other union organizations try to make people aware of the importance of union work and oppose the repressive tactics of the government. Ricardo stresses the value of international accompaniment in support of the passage of the ILO Conventions and their application, as well as pressure on the Labor Ministry to effectively execute the laws they already have in place.

As the struggle continues, Ricardo notes the goals of the union movement and the optimism and solidarity they feel with workers everywhere. "To speak of solidarity is to speak of achieving a state of unity in action," he asserts. He recognizes that among people and within the unionist movement there are many different opinions and ways of thinking. However, there is also solidarity and the shared idea of creating "a truly integrated state, of constructing a different country, and even a different region--a different Central America."

"Our organization is like yours," he concludes, referring to CISPES. "We are about action, not just writing documents and having meetings, but taking all of that and putting it into practice."