

HISTORY AND MOTIVATIONS OF U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN THE CONTROL OF THE PEASANT MOVEMENT IN EL SALVADOR

The Role of AIFLD in the Agrarian Reform Process 1970 - 1980

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-- The Role Of AIFLD In The Agrarian Reform Process

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Introduction

The agrarian reform process over the past decade in El Salvador points to a consistent policy and practice of control over and manipulation of the indigenous, spontaneous and organized efforts of Salvadorean peasant (campesino) movements. This control has been achieved during these ten years by the Salvadorean oligarchy, the interdependent military and para-military forces in the country, and public and private U.S. agencies. This control includes: direct expulsion of campesinos from the land, manipulation of the peasants and their cooperatives, pretense at agrarian reform, threats, imprisonment, torture and death. Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that the mere use of the term "agrarian reform" implies any positive change in the case of El Salvador. Whether one is referring to the past land tenure system or the present agrarian reform, one must always ask the same questions: Who controls it? What is the motivation? Is there in fact any real or lasting benefit for the campesinos?

Such careful definition is particularly important in examining the "Agrarian Reform" initiated on March 6, 1980. This reform is part of the strategy of land re-distribution and bank nationalization projected by the military government of El Salvador following the coup d'etat of October 15, 1979, in which the U.S. government was deeply involved. In fact, the strategy was a joint venture of the Department of State and the colonels of the Salvadorean Armed Forces which

contained three basic goals: a) to replace the military dictatorship of Carlos Humberto Romero and his top military associates so that the popular and progressive forces in El Salvador could not target Romero as an anachronistic, repressive and ruling class symbol as the Sandinistas did with Somoza in Nicaragua; b) to force the Salvadorean oligarchy to accept certain adjustments and rearrangements of economic power and the relinquishing of land holdings as a condition for remaining in control; and c) to carry out a technocratic and authoritarian land reform in conjunction with massive repression--indiscriminate in nature in the countryside--thereby terrorizing the rural population and hopefully preventing it from joining or supporting the increasingly politicized popular masses and revolutionary vanguard.

Agrarian reform became the principle rationalization in this strategy--both internally and internationally--since it was supposedly aimed at helping the rural poor. Because most Latin American countries are dominated by a small land-owning class, agrarian reform is one of the great symbols of progress. Such a reform in El Salvador could therefore be used to legitimize the new military government and sway liberal and concerned sectors of the international community. For that reason, the issue of agrarian reform has a powerful political potential that goes far beyond any reform in itself. Thus the U.S. government is using the present agrarian reform as one of its most effective propaganda instruments.

As we review the events of the past ten years in terms of U.S. involvement in El Salvador in the campesino movement, it is critical to keep in mind the motivations of three social sectors in particular: the peasants and their campesino organizations, especially the organized cooperatives; the military and para-military forces working in tandem; and the Unión Comunal Salvadoreña (UCS), created by the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) which is economically sustained by Agency for International Development (U.S. AID). The

peasants, of course, wanted either land or a genuine land reform; the military wanted to either control the land for the oligarchy (before the coup d'etat) or carry out a technocratic land reform without campesino participation; and AIFLD-- through its utilization of the UCS--wanted to prevent the campesinos from carrying out any progressive rural change, charging that such efforts were "communistic" in nature. The role of AIFLD is particularly important for North American citizens because it is primarily funded by taxes (through USAID) and because AIFLD is today directly involved in the present agrarian reform process.

The History Of Crisis On The Land

The Latin American Regional Report (LARR) recently published a single page overview of the agrarian reform process in El Salvador entitled "One hundred years of crisis on the land." The opening paragraphs of that piece provides a context:

El Salvador's political crisis took root a century ago. In March 1880 the government ruled that all ejido collective land should become private property. Laws enacted during that decade, at the time of the great international coffee boom, suppressed communal land ownership and paved the way for concentration of land in the hands of the '14 families.' Peasants were evicted to work on the large estates, and a rural police force was created to make sure they did so.

Continuing conflicts over the eviction of peasants from the land led, 50 years later, to the rural rebellion of 1932. Some 32,000 peasants were killed by the army. Fears of another revolt led to the outlawing of peasant unions and the modernization of the paramilitary organization, ORDEN, created in 1967.¹

On December 30, 1961, the United States government signed a "General Agreement for Economic and Technical Assistance" with the Salvadorean government in an attempt to modify the feudal land structure. But the Salvadorean oligarchy resisted the efforts of

the Alliance for Progress to carry out any kind of change in the countryside. Because the accord was signed by a Civic Military Directorate which had always carried out the bidding of the "14 families" (now closer to 200) that controlled El Salvador's economy and land, the main result of the agreement was to increase military missions and equipment. As the then U.S. Ambassador, Murat W. Williams, wrote recently:

I told Secretary of State Dean Rusk that I thought our military missions were excessive. Mr. Rusk listened sympathetically and he urged me to write a recommendation so we could reduce them. Alas, strong Department of Defense objections blocked our effort. Within five years of his retirement in 1964, we saw the ridiculous, appalling spectacle of a Salvadorean Army, trained and equipped by the United States, at war with a Honduran Army, also trained and equipped by us.²

Because that war led to a serious weakening of the Central American Common Market and because national class contradictions were spilling over the border, disrupting regional stability, the United States pressured for modifications in El Salvador's rural structures, giving rise to the reform proposals of President Arturo Molina, presented by him as "life insurance" for the Salvadorean capitalists.

The common excuse given for the "soccer war" between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969 was the "encroachment" of Salvadorean peasants on Honduran lands due to over-population. In fact, Honduras has an abundance of unoccupied and underdeveloped land and the Salvadorean campesinos who for years had gradually emigrated to Honduras lived there in peace as productive farmers, often marrying Honduran women and raising families along with their Honduran counterparts, especially in the El Progreso area near San Pedro Sula. The occasion for the war was the initiation of a limited

agrarian reform project in Honduras by the National Agrarian Institute (INA). INA's problem was that its repeated attempts to expropriate any of the extensive unused and unoccupied lands available from the Honduran oligarchy were frustrated. When the Inter-American Development Bank approved (though it had not yet contracted) a \$7.7 million grant for agrarian reform in Honduras, INA was forced to expel thousands of Salvadorean squatter farmers and take their meager plots.³ The form of that expulsion was swift and repressive. In retaliation a patriotic war ensued--at the same time a series of soccer games were underway--in which the oligarchies of each country used national chauvinism to mask injustices perpetrated against the poor in each nation.

Role of AIFLD in El Salvador: The UCS

The history of the Unión Comunal Salvadoreña (UCS) began in 1962 when the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) signed a contract with the Ministry of Labor and the American Institute For Free Labor Development (AIFLD), an agency of the AFL-CIO created to train campesino leaders as part of the program of the Alliance For Progress. In order to establish relationships with Salvadorean campesinos, it held training seminars (the first involving 18 persons in November 1965) through the Catholic Church's CARITAS clubs and the Alliance For Progress boards, which groups offered AIFLD the names of "apt" campesinos to participate in the seminars.⁴ In 1967, AIFLD carried out five more seminars in conjunction with the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) which perceived in the first 150 campesino graduates from those programs the leadership potential for an eventual electoral victory for the PDC in the countryside.

Between February and March 1968, the first local "Uniones Comunales" (in Usulutaca and Virolena) were established with campesino representatives in each area. In addition, AIFLD set up cooperatives in La Paz "which were to be cultivated in conjunction with cattle to be shared according to the work days of each of the coop members, without remuneration."⁵ The technical help for these coops came from the government's Agricultural Extension Program, food was provided by CARITAS and the funding from USAID, not withstanding criticism from local capitalists in San Salvador who accused the coops of being "communist."⁶ By mid-1968, the leaders of some 20 of these local Uniones Comunales, with some 4,000 members, were brought together by AIFLD to form the Unión Comunal Salvadoreña (UCS), administered by a National Executive Council (CEN). Thus from its inception the UCS has been an AIFLD creation and instrument.

The negative impact of the Honduran-Salvadorean war of 1969 convinced some members of the military and oligarchy that it was in their best interest to carry out these rural training programs to modify protests. On March 3, 1970, AIFLD signed a contract with USAID for \$136,600 and entered into an agreement with the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare of the Government of El Salvador to train Salvadorean campesino leaders.⁷ This contract was followed by a second grant of \$53,800 on April 20, 1971, and another for \$113,979 on June 16 of that same year. Again on May 15, 1972 AIFLD received yet another grant from USAID for \$135,000 for the "continued services of AIFLD in labor education and social development activities with urban and rural worker groups."⁸ These significant training grants were also used to expand the facilities and land holdings of UCS coops.

Officially, the ALF-CIO claims that AIFLD was created "to buttress democracy in Latin American through free and strong labor unions."⁹ In fact, AIFLD's activities are chiefly aimed at counteracting "communist" organizing among peasants. Its training seminars held both in El Salvador and in Front Royal, Virginia (originally in Georgetown, Washington, D.C.) stressed the "dangers of communism" which are confronting "democratic" trade unions in Latin America. The primary work of AIFLD is clearly political since the AFL-CIO has its own Latin American labor affiliate, the Regional Organization of Inter-American Workers (ORIT), which is perfectly capable of carrying out trade union training courses. AIFLD's political role has already been proven in relation to the overthrow of the democratically elected (then) President of Guyana, Cheddi Jagan and his People's Progressive Party (PPP) in the 1962-64 period. As Jagan has said:

In their crusade to destroy Communism and Communists, the AFL-CIO and AIFLD will stop at nothing even if it means destroying the workers by making them victims of capitalists...¹⁰

According to Jagan, the PPP was initially destabilized in the 1950's and the work of AIFLD in the 1960's was carried out in collaboration with the CIA.

As a result of the tremendous needs of the rural population in El Salvador and the Medellin Conference of Catholic bishops in 1968, the Catholic Church, the Christian Democratic Party, and various labor unions encouraged the formation of rural workers' associations in the late 1960's. One of these was the Federacion de Campesinos Cristianos (FECCAS) which pressured the government of El Salvador for agrarian reforms. Although three cabinet members and a few of the liberal

military officers recommended reform, it was finally frustrated through legal restraint and campesino repression led by the then Minister of Defense and Public Security, Carlos Humberto Romero.¹¹

AIFLD's problems with Romero and others in the Salvadorean military arose in 1973 when AIFLD sent to El Salvador as its in-country director, one Torres Laso, a Nicaraguan who had been a colonel in the Nicaraguan National Guard under Somoza. Under the patronage of the Somoza family, Laso studied law in Spain and became chief prosecutor of the accused assassins of Tacho Somoza in 1956.¹² Subsequently, however, the Somoza brothers (Luis and Tachito) came to suspect Laso of involvement with political opponents of the dynasty and exiled him. Laso emerged two years later in 1973 with American citizenship and the assignment to El Salvador as AIFLD's in-country director, overseeing the activities of the UCS. Certain military officials in El Salvador viewed Laso's presence with alarm.¹³ As a result, the Molina government asked that Laso be removed. When the request was denied, the government of El Salvador expelled AIFLD from the country on August 31, 1973. The head of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare wrote to James Derum, Director of USAID:

On the other hand, according to the conditions in Article VI, No. 2 of the General Agreement for Economic and Technical Assistance Aid...signed December 19, 1961, under the present circumstances, the continuation of the aforementioned education program [of AIFLD] is now no longer considered necessary (our emphasis).¹⁴

This was the first time AIFLD had ever been expelled from a country. The U.S. government's explanation for the expulsion was that the government of El Salvador viewed AIFLD's labor organizing as too radical and because "union literature" was being distributed to the campesinos through the UCS.

Interim Years Of IAF & Venezuela Funding

And UCS Management Influence By AIFLD: 1973-77

AIFLD, determined to return to El Salvador, embarked on a campaign to provoke dissension within the UCS leadership and to sabotage UCS activities, all to prove that its own presence was needed. Its first step was to appoint a new field representative, Tito Castro, who would channel all funds to the UCS. Acting in this capacity, Castro became a significant labor figure in El Salvador. Castro was further endeared to AIFLD when it hailed him as an "internationally known labor leader" in the United States.

Castro was a school teacher and former employee of CARITAS, was not a member of UCS, and his first labor experience was with AIFLD. Eventually Castro's inexperience and his resulting mismanagement of UCS funds was exploited by AIFLD and later it accused him of fraud.¹⁵

Direct pressure for gaining its re-admission into El Salvador was exerted on June 14, 1974, when various labor unions (CGS, FESINCONTRANS, FESINTRABS, etc.) announced to the Salvadorean government that they had just formed a "Salvadorean Institute For Trade Union Studies" (ISES) "to educate trade union leaders in formation and to enrich the intellectual capacity of the national trade union movement."¹⁶ Their letter was sent to the Ministry of Labor requesting its opinion and cooperation. In addition, the letter sought the "technical cooperation" of AIFLD to help carry out this program.

With the expulsion of AIFLD, and the embarrassment it caused the U.S. Embassy, USAID funding for campesino leadership training

by AIFLD was cut off during the years 1974 and 1975, but was replaced by significant grants from the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), a semi-governmental private organization funding grass roots labor, community and cultural groups in Latin America. In 1973, for example, IAF gave the Inter-American Institute for Agricultural Sciences (IICA) \$ 133,642 to evaluate the programs of the UCS and to document the progress and impact of the UCS on the agrarian reform experience in El Salvador.¹⁷ This evaluation was quite critical of the UCS but it did not examine the causes behind UCS's difficulties. That same year, IAF gave the UCS \$ 400,000 to form a Multiple Services Cooperative which subsequently went bankrupt. In 1973, UCS also requested \$ 400,000 from IAF to create two centralized cooperatives out of which a Savings & Credit Cooperative was created in 1974-1975.¹⁸ During those years, some 22 new campesino groups joined the UCS bringing with them some 545 new campesino members. According to IAF staff, the rationale used to justify the funding throws some interesting light on the negative attitude of certain U.S. agencies about AIFLD practices: the argument for funding UCS was that it would give the Union increased independence from AIFLD allowing it to develop without that outside influence. But AIFLD had its Technical Advisor, Roberto "Tito" Castro, and its Administrator, Jorge Camacho virtually controlling the "Central Office". Furthermore, after 1975, even though USAID began once again to fund AIFLD projects in El Salvador, the IAF continued to support UCS to the tune of \$ 700,000 without requiring strict accounting. While such financial assistance produced marked growth in UCS membership—from 30,000 in 1973 to 70,000 by 1975¹⁹— the issue of the use or misuse of these funds was repeatedly raised, including by IAF personnel.

Parallel to UCS developments, other more politicized peasant organizations were expanding and uniting. Following the 1973 repression, the labor organization FECCAS, rooted in Christian Democratic and Catholic traditions, merged with an

independent peasant group, the Farmworkers Union (UTC), in 1975. The joint organization FECCAS-UTC made repeated requests for land reform, seeds, fertilizer, and modest increases in the minimum wage, but these were answered with government silence. At the grassroots level, FECCAS-UTC sustained heavy repression from the para-military group, ORDEN, the powerful government-sponsored rural organization officially linked to the Ministry of Defense and controlled by retired and active military officers. As a rural vigilante watchdog, ORDEN intimidated local leadership, blocked community meetings, and was directly responsible for electoral fraud and the disappearance and murder of campesino leaders, including some Catholic priests cooperating with peasant organizations. In some cases, entire villages--known to be FECCAS-UTC centers--were sacked and burned. As a result, FECCAS-UTC went underground, joining the Revolutionary Popular Bloc (BPR) which today includes the National Teachers Union (ANDES) and several student organizations.²⁰ Interestingly, UCS was never targeted by ORDEN for such repression.

In addition to this rising ferment led by progressive campesino organizations, the peasants in general were finding it increasingly difficult to survive. Population growth in conjunction with the distorted social pyramid dominated by a few wealthy families, rural unemployment and the numbers of landless peasants increased rapidly. For instance, "the Salvadorean landless rural labor force had increased from 30,000 in 1961(11% of the total number of peasants) to 112,000 (29% of the total) in 1971, and 166,000 (40%) in 1975." ²¹ In an attempt to modify this explosive situation, the Molina government announced a Transformación Agraria (on June 29, 1976). The reform was extremely limited in scope since only 4% of the country's land would be affected and only 12,000 campesinos involved, which meant creating a new caste of small landowners. ²²

To carry out the plan, Molina passed an Agrarian Reform Law and set up the Agrarian Transformation Institute (ISTA), while arguing with the oligarchy that such a reform was their "life insurance." They would have none of it. The leading families of the largest landowning dynasties initiated an anti-reform propaganda campaign, including a national media blitz that bitterly polarized the society. As a result, ISTA was effectively stripped of its reform powers, although it remained intact as an organization. Many campesinos and some Jesuits from the Central American University (UCA) were not so fortunate, becoming victims of vicious persecution and assassinations by rightist vigilante groups made up of reactionary landowners, especially the coffee, cotton and cane producers. The defeat of the reform "signified the eclipse of the modernizing tendency within the [upper class]." ²³

Developments within the UCS around this reform process are instructive. Most of its membership supported the 1976 reform even though it was extremely modest in scope. The UCS reflected this sentiment by marching 25,000 strong in support of Molina's plan. Since Molina's term of office was ending and Romero was projected as his replacement, the UCS responded by backing Colonel Ebelio Flores Amaya thereby reflecting their hope in some of the younger officers who they believed supported reform. Support for a moderate military faded as the oligarchy totally backed Romero for president—but this may have been a foreshadowing of the reform presently underway in El Salvador.

These reactions to the promise and frustration of the 1976 reform, represent the first sign of politization within UCS ranks, which until then had neither an ideology nor even a plan for rural change, except the goal of securing immediate, short-term economic benefits, a union philosophy traditionally advocated by the AFL-CIO. Furthermore, because UCS lacked leadership that could provide its members with any clear political education much less an orientation, the union simply moved from issue to issue. Although the UCS

operates by certain democratic principles at the campesino membership level, it is politically liberal and dependent on outside funding. This is why the UCS could be so easily used. Still, the historical process of 1976 shook many of its affiliates coming, as it did, at a time when UCS leadership was in a period of internal crisis.

Another method used by AIFLD to move back into El Salvador was developed by the Institute in 1976 when its regional director, Michael Hammer, proposed to the Venezuelan government a five-year "Country Labor Plan" (Plan Laboral Del Pais) for the period 1976-1980.²⁴ Early in 1976, Hammer joined Abraham Hasson, of HISTADRUT, Israel's General Confederation of Labor, for a study tour which included Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, at which time they decided to set up an "international peasant training center (the Instituto Campesino de Cultura, ICC) with headquarters in El Salvador."²⁵ This five-year plan was to be handled by the Agrarian Union Development Services (AUDS) of AIFLD to the tune of \$ 720,037 for only a two-year period, the money coming from Venezuela. A report on this plan stated that "AIFLD/HISTADRUT [should] consider specific country assistance strategies," while the report underscores the point that what is needed from HISTADRUT was not the Israeli models "but Israeli ingenuity."²⁶ Given Israel's subsequent role as the principle supplier of arms to Somoza and since then to other Central American military governments makes HISTADRUT's role in conjunction with AIFLD extremely questionable. Moreover, the particular concern of the Country Labor Plan for El Salvador was work within the UCS.

During this same period (1975-77), AIFLD began to secretly nurture another potential campesino leader, Jorge Camacho, periodically insinuating to him that Tito Castro was stealing UCS funds. Camacho became an informer to both U.S. and Salvadorean officials about the internal activities of the UCS and created

dissension within the organization that would eventually prove fatal. Camacho's relationship with the UCS was as an agent of ORDEN. As the UCS's intelligent but corrupt Administrator, Camacho also used his leadership role to control the cooperatives and their campesino membership, following orders from certain reactionary forces in the country. Although Castro was never required to officially account for money channelled through him, AIFLD in 1977 suddenly froze UCS funding and asked the IAF to audit UCS's financial practices. The stoppage of funds from both of these international bodies brought all thirteen cooperatives of the UCS to near financial ruin; campesinos were impoverished, causing many deaths due to starvation, particularly among children. The key AIFLD advisor handling this conspiracy was Michael Hammer, a high official of AIFLD based in Caracas.

The IAF sent an auditor-investigator to examine the UCS, John Strasma, a Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin. After a thorough investigation in 1977, Strasma prepared both a full report on the UCS and a summary which in part stated:

Misappropriation of funds was the rule, not the exception, from 1974 through the middle of 1977. This is the direct and unambiguous responsibility of Tito Castro, who defends it on the grounds of the urgent needs of the groups to which funds were channelled without approval of the funders. It is also somewhat the fault of the Inter-American Foundation and AIFLD, which were aware of the practice and did not move to stop it. 27

The problems between Castro and Camacho were revealed in a subsequent letter by Strasma to Joe Johnson, Cultural Affairs officer of the U.S. Embassy on January 5, 1978 in which he said:

I was trying to find out how a peasant movement so strong at the base level could have such financial problems at the national level. I had learned that there was no operation budget, and that many of the assets on the balance sheet were uncollectable loans. When I asked Jorge Camacho whether he had any explanation, he asked me to come to his house to see some documents...He showed me documentary proof of three irregularities, and partial proof of several other possible irregularities. He relayed a number of other accusations at Tito Castro, alleging larceny and worse, as causes of UCS's troubles. And he asked me to report this to the Foundation IAF, hoping the Foundation would then force Tito out, or at least force him into keeping good and honest books, such as we urge upon all base cooperatives. 28

Michael Hammer, AIFLD's regional director for Central America, however, openly supported Tito Castro in letter after letter, particularly during 1977. On June 8, for instance, he wrote: "I assure you of my complete faith and confidence in your honor and work over the long years of forging the UCS," adding the crucial phrase, "The important thing now is to smooth the path for the entrance of the Institute [i.e. AIFLD back into El Salvador]" 29 (our emphasis). John Strasma, in a hand-written note which he acknowledged was his own, completely contradicts Hammer by saying: "Tito Castro has falsified far more documents, and has pocketed substantial amounts of Foundation money. Rodolfo Viera, in close alliance with Tito, appears to have pocketed even more funds..." and, "Neither Tito Castro nor Rodolfo Viera should be financed in any way by U.S. tax payer funds until restitution has been made; AIFLD should terminate them as quickly as possible." 30

As a result of these charges, during late 1977 and early 1978, a struggle ensued within the UCS over its future leadership. At that point, Rodolfo Viera and other UCS leaders accused Camacho of having stolen UCS funds. While Camacho tried to level the same accusation against Viera, the campesino membership-- slowly figuring out who is truly on their side-- vindicated Viera who then became

the new head of UCS, while Camacho departed with a few campesinos and founded a new organization, the Asociacion Cooperativa de Productos Apecuarios Integrados (ACOPAI). This change not only represents the growing consciousness of Viera and other UCS leaders, but the end of managerial control over the Union by agents of AIFLD (i.e., Castro) and ORDEN (i.e., Camacho).

The American Embassy refused to deal with UCS on the grounds of disunity; a disunity created by AIFLD. The cut-off of funding from both IAF and USAID resulted in a decline in UCS membership leading AIFLD to depict the campesinos as incapable of running their own affairs, smugly arguing to the embassy that its expertise was obviously still needed.

After February, 1978, the clarifications within the UCS led to two important developments: first, a number of the politically liberal and Christian Democratic campesinos begin to realize that AIFLD was not acting in their interests. Second, progressive campesinos linked to the Frente Amplio Popular Unificado (FAPU) and the Bloque Popular Revolucionario (BPR) increased their participation in UCS. Thus, after February 1978, the UCS—now rid of both Camacho and Castro and increasingly alienated from AIFLD—operate more independently. Notwithstanding this diminished influence by AIFLD on the UCS, it continues to use UCS's name to secure funding from USAID and to justify its right to re-enter El Salvador.

The problem with AIFLD was structural as well as political and revolved around the U.S. Embassy's claim that they were unable to control the private activities of AIFLD while an official U.S. agency (AID) was funding it. An interesting critique of this problem came from one Leonel Gómez Vides, an advisor to UCS, who wrote this analysis:

AIFLD, an organization that has had under its charge the most sensitive sector of the country, the Salvadorean Communal Union, is sponsored by trade unions, private firms and the North American government. Its financing comes 90% from the AID agency. Nonetheless, it is not an official program of the United States which means it does not have to abide by understandings established between one State and another. Notwithstanding, AIFLD is the only channel on which the North Americans count to develop democratic union movements...The lack of control over this Institute carries with it as a consequence serious problems for the social development of the very persons it pretends to help. 31

From the historical perspective, AIFLD was created as an anti-Cuban cold war instrument to combat "communism" among trade unionists at the grass-roots level in Latin America. During more liberal periods or for some liberals in the State Department, AIFLD appears as somewhat anachronistic and unsophisticated, whereas during more conservative or reactionary moments, the relationships are more closely attuned. Thus while there may be a gap between the trilateralist economics and AIFLD traditional view, an anti-communist and more aggressive geo-political period, there is a growing coalescence.

As relationships between the U.S. Embassy and UCS worsened during 1978, it interceded on AIFLD's behalf with the Salvadorean government. Requests for its re-entry were received coldly at first. However, through a series of difficult negotiations and strong U.S. pressure, the Embassy finally secured AIFLD's re-entry during Romero's last months in power. The agreement between the United States and the Romero regime severely limited AIFLD's activities in the country and stipulated extensive Embassy oversight. These conditions were included in a "Memorandum of Understanding" signed on June 28, 1979, which stated among other things:

1. AIFLD proposes to have a Country Program Officer to monitor the range of activities set forth for El Salvador (and specifically the Unión Comunal Salvadoreña (UCS) in the Agrarian Union Development Services (AUDS) portion of the AIFLD Program Proposals for any given year.

2. The duration of an AIFLD presence would be indefinite, subject to AID-AIFLD contract conditions and to the wishes of the Government of El Salvador...

6. Responsibility to the Embassy. The Country Program Director will be held accountable to the Ambassador not only for his actions and those of his immediate staff, but also for the actions of AIFLD employees permanently or temporarily stationed in El Salvador, either on a bi-lateral or regional basis... 32

The date of this Memorandum is significant when viewed in light of the events in Nicaragua at that moment; i.e., in late June 1979, when the battle of Managua made it clear that Somoza's days were numbered. With an FSLN victory in sight, it became urgent that the United States closely monitor the events in the problem areas of Central America, especially in Guatemala and El Salvador. When Viron Vakey of the State Department visited El Salvador in September 1979, he spoke of the "absence of change"--that is, of the anachronism of the Salvadorean feudal system. Since an "agrarian reform" could provide such a change, it became critical to have AIFLD in the country to help facilitate the process.

The financial contract drawn up to implement this new AIFLD penetration into El Salvador was \$203,575 from USAID for fiscal year 1979-1980. That is to say, that the U.S. Government is fully behind AIFLD's new role in El Salvador. 33

The Military Coup D'Etat & The Agrarian Reform Rationale

The present Agrarian Reform project was first announced at the time of the military coup d'etat on October 15, 1979 although it was not officially enacted until five months later. Since the colonels that carried out that coup and which make up the Supreme Command of the present Armed Forces, it is important to understand what that military change implied in terms of both its continuity or discontinuity and its new goals. In the first place, when

the Junta de Gobierno (including some civilians but dominated by the Armed Forces) declared that the repressive para-military arm of the Defense Ministry, ORDEN, was illegal, this was merely a formal action. That is, while technically ORDEN was discontinued, in fact it carried out the same repressive function as before, particularly in the countryside. That is, when a number of the military officers from the previous government were removed from their posts, they did not retire but moved into para-military service. Specifically, the founder of ORDEN, General José Alberto "Chele" Medrano, now heads up the Nationalist Democratic Front (FDN), which is simply the new name for ORDEN. It is also important to note that Medrano was not a pro-Romero officer, but in fact is loyal to or a collaborator with Colonels Garcia and Gutierrez, the heads of the "new" military Supreme Command. Similarly, when Major Roberto D'Abuissón, chief of tortures operations under Romero, was removed from official power on October 15, he instituted the Frente Amplio Nacionalista (FAN) which carries out some of the worst atrocities against the campesino population completely unrestrained by the new military hierarchy. While the official closing down of ORDEN now means that the Armed Forces must carry out the process of occupying the large land holdings, the military and para-military structures remain intact and the continuation of relationships between the "old" and "new" military leaders never ceased functioning. Thus, one of the greatest myths perpetrated by the United States government and its propaganda machinery is its statement that there is a clear distinction between the Armed Forces and the so-called "extreme right". This is a lie, the two groups work in close consort. Indeed, at the very moment of announcing the Agrarian Reform, the new military instituted a "State of Siege" covering the entire national territory, which Siege gives them unlimited power to take any action against the Salvadorean population it chooses.

When the Agrarian Reform was announced last Fall, the responsibility for carrying out such a project in terms of administration and coordination properly belonged to the Ministry of Agriculture (MAG). There were two problems with MAG's role in this process: the matter of capability and the issue of decision-making. In terms of capability, MAG had only a limited number of administrators and technicians. Many competent agronomists and engineers in El Salvador work for the private sector where the salaries much higher than those offered by MAG. Even more important, because the political objectives of the Agrarian Reform took precedence over social and economic priorities, MAG was ill-prepared therefore to administer such a vast program of change. The second problem had to do with decision-making which in turn involved the matter of respect which MAG needed to be effective among the campesinos and their organizations. This was exacerbated when the Junta de Gobierno appointed as Minister of Agriculture, Octavio Orrelana Solis last fall. He has proved to be completely incompetent. By contrast, the Under Secretary of Agriculture, Jorge Villacorta is highly qualified and respected both by the new military as well as by the campesino organizations. However during the fall as civilian resignations increased and the process of the "rightization" of the Armed Forces developed, fewer and fewer decisions were left in Villacorta's hands. During an interview by El Diario De Hoy on March 12, 1980 about the Agrarian Reform, Villacorta—who was at that very moment preparing to resign his post-- was questioned about what measures were being taken to guarantee a proper and peaceful change of ownership. Villacorta replied:

Yes, of course, this is definitively a disquieting matter about which we have to speak of two moments. The first is when the decree is given and those lands over 500 hectares are immediately occupied by the Armed Forces....The second stage then begins with managerial matters: the incorporation of the nearest campesinos depending on how many that property can hold. That move occurs through the participation of these three sectors: the Armed Forces, the technicians, and the campesinos who reside there and who are becoming incorpora-

ted into the process at this moment with great enthusiasm through the distribution of land which is occurring on the large properties. 34

Although Villacorta said this under / ^{pressure,} it is true there was an initial euphoria among the campesinos engendered by the fact of the military taking land away from hated large landowners. Villacorta had already been officially threatened by Roberto D'Abuissón (around February 15) on public television but unafraid he stayed on notwithstanding the danger. Then around mid-March 1980, he left the country for San José, Costa Rica where he made the following statement:

It is impossible to work in that situation because there is no possibility of [MAG and ISTA] participating in the decision-making process. The result is that the government is losing the minimal support it once had and the leadership of the reform is falling completely under the control of the right. 35

There are two other government agencies involved in the Agrarian Reform process in El Salvador. The first is the Agrarian Transformation Institute (ISTA) which had a certain historic legitimacy because it had tried to begin an agrarian reform project under Molina in 1976. By the fall of 1979, however, ISTA was a powerless, non-descript agency waiting around to see what might happen. However, precisely because ISTA was the least politically-tainted agency, the military government resurrected it to help manage the reform along with MAG. However, reflective of its limited power, ISTA was not advised of its role in the reform until only days before the reform was instituted on March 6, 1980.

Another government agency that originally was to have some significant role or power was the Instituto Salvadoreña de Fomento Cooperativo (INSAFOCOOP). INSAFOCOOP is an autonomous agency created by the state to oversee the needs of all cooperatives in the country, of which there are more than 500--150 of these being rural or campesino coops. The real task of INSAFOCOOP is to motivate and direct the cooperative movement in El Salvador. INSAFOCOOP enjoys a degree of

legitimacy at the grass roots level through its relationships with the coops even though it has very limited powers. It was probably co-named with ISTA to play a role in the agrarian reform in order to give the reform certain credence and to facilitate relationships between the government and the campesinos .

There is, however, a power struggle going on even at this level between liberal and reactionary sectors expressed as a struggle between organizations or personalities, in this case between ACOPAI and INSAFOCOOP. Thus, following the coup of October 15, Jorge Camacho as head of ACOPAI, attempted to set up a "Federación de Cooperativos Apecuarios de Producción (la Federación) --as a government agency that could be responsible for administering all technical services to the nation's cooperatives, which he, Camacho, would then direct. The move was questioned on the grounds of the project's illegitimacy. Camacho had applied for the establishment of the "Federación" based on support from only three of the existing 150 coops. INSAFOCOOP delayed action on the request until the matter could be presented to its cooperatives. Subsequently, the overwhelming majority rejected Camacho's scheme.

This brief review of the power behind the reforms in El Salvador argue that its chances of success appear very slight. However, it is important to emphasize that a significant change is occurring in the rural areas of El Salvador. The question is towards what end? Is it helping the campesinos? And, who is directing it? The answer to these questions are all clearly the U.S. government and Salvadorean Armed Forces. The present agrarian reform is "significant" for two reasons: because of its size, and, because it is eliminating or will eliminate the large landholders from El Salvador with the exception of the coffee producers, which represents the most profitable agricultural sector. That is why the reform has begun with those holdings of 500 hectares

and over since most coffee plantations range from 50 to 150 hectares in size. It is clear ^{that} the decision to carry out an agrarian reform came from the United States, the purpose being to end the anachronistic land tenure system and to force the landed aristocracy—except for the coffee producers— back into the city where they will have to invest 75% of the value of their expropriated properties into industrial and commercial ventures. The present agrarian reform is therefore a sophisticated capitalist venture aimed at breaking up Salvador feudal plantations. On the other hand, it is authoritarian in nature, a reform in which the campesinos will not own but rent land, and it being carried out in an arbitrary fashion with no dialogue. More importantly, certain carefully selected campesinos will be placed on land controlled by the state. The military and para-military forces are carrying out this reform with a ruthlessness that makes the repression of the past latifundistas and the Romero government appear moderate and restrained by comparison. It is important for North Americans to understand that this is an imposed reform, forced upon the Salvadorean military and upon the people by U.S. fiat because El Salvador has regional implications that no longer allowed the United States the liberty to leave matters in the Salvadorean hands.

Actual Reports On The Nature Of The Present Agrarian Reform

The progressive forces in El Salvador recently released a document entitled "Agrarian Reform and the Nationalization of Banks" in which they said:

In the first place, this strategy advanced by the dominant classes consisted in working out a pact between themselves (imperialism, the armed forces and the oligarchy), a pact which included the elements of both reform and a State of Siege. This pact would help them resolve the existing contradictions within the heart of their own class while consolidating themselves in power in order to make a greater impact upon the Popular Revolutionary Movement and find a more adequate formula for making their repression more effective.

In order to accomplish this project, they imposed an Agrarian Reform through which the oligarchy compromised its position by giving up part of its land without protest on the condition that the Popular Revolutionary Movement be destroyed. U.S. imperialism committed itself to finance the project by paying off the oligarchy and financing the military so it could intensify its repression.

The Christian Democrats have gone along with these plans, willing to betray our People by serving as an instrument by justifying the repression by continuing to play the game at the international level through suggesting they are living in a democratic country and that it is the extreme right and left which are holding the Government captive, which in turn is therefore obliged to carry out measures to counter these obstacles.

The fundamental aspects of the Agrarian Reform are these:

It is a reform by stages, that is, first to take the lands of 500 hectares and larger; then, to continue to the smaller holdings.

It is important to note that the Agrarian Reform is concentrated in those lands of 500 hectares and larger. The greatest source of income for the oligarchy comes from coffee which is primarily cultivated on farms ranging from 50 to 150 hectares. Therefore the reform is not touching the real power of the oligarchy proceeding from its coffee profits. Proof of this fact is that less than 1% of the coffee cultivations are affected by the reform.

On the other hand, the land will not be turned over to the campesinos as property, but they will have to pay a monthly rental for its use.

The oligarchy is being paid 25% of the value of their expropriated land in cash and 75% in bonds, with which the oligarchy can invest in other areas of the economy.

Furthermore, the land being divided is to be given to those farmers who are well-known as members of UCS and ORDEN, whose directives are already clearly defined: to divide up the newly expropriated land among those persons who these two organizations control. If other farmers, belonging to other organizations seek land, they are either killed or given nothing. ³⁶

The question remains who of those local campesinos are receiving and under what conditions are others being rejected? An eye-witness

of the "reform" program who is neither a part of the government nor a member of any of the Salvadorean organizations of the left recently reported the following from a report made in El Salvador:

"The government's announcement of agrarian reform," according to an Amnesty International report, "was coupled with a state of siege censoring the news media. Since then Amnesty has received reports of 80 people including at least 28 children killed in Cuscatlan Department alone. In Chalatenango Department, a circle of fire was lit around a village to prevent people escaping: troops entered the village, killing some 40 people and abducting many others."

The report went on to say that "troops were ordered to occupy plantations...Under these orders, they attacked villages supporting opposition peasant unions...Land seized has been handed over to members of ORDEN, a movement clandestinely organized by El Salvador's previous government to use... 'guerrilla-style' terror against government opponents..."

I spoke with campesinos who said: "If these people know that we want the land, they will give it to us in the beginning and will kill us later."

I asked a young Catholic who lives in Aguillares to tell me something about that village as it is now. I received a cautious response: 'Do not say if I am a man or woman, do not give my profession. I will try to describe Aguillares to you. It is now a very quiet place, compared to the very busy place it once was. Four weeks ago, it was completely different. If you go there now, you don't see people. There are no children. You cannot see women baking tortillas. You see birds eating corn. It is pitiful. When you drive along a small road, the houses are shut and you encounter refugees, old women, old men, two or three small children carrying a bundle and maybe a hen, because they can sell the hen, the hen is worth something. They have maybe two colones, less than a dollar...'

On March 6, there were 12 people killed in Aguillares. They were all tortured severely. 'For instance,' my informant went on, 'the torturers scraped the skin off their faces and gave long shallow cuts with machetes along their arms. They cut their fingers lengthwise. If you see the backs of corpses, they are purple with bootprints.' If they don't find people at home, they burn their houses and corn. They put bedclothes and blankets together and start them on fire. The roofs are of wood. They collapse and then there are no beds, no clothing, no houses. This has been done by the National Guard..." 57

Dozens of refugees fleeing these same areas reached San Salvador at the time the Ecumenical Commission was visiting the capital. These refugees confirmed the above accounts and stated that it was the uniformed soldiers of the Armed Forces that are directly involved in these atrocities. 38

Two things stand out in these reports: first, that the forced expulsion of campesinos from the land is related to the placement of certain selected peasants who are acceptable to the Junta de Gobierno and to ORDEN. This implies an agrarian pacification program. Second, that the regular Armed Forces—not merely the "extreme rightist" groups are involved in these expulsions and extreme repression. It is clear, therefore, that one fundamental goal of the present reform is to terrorize the rural population of El Salvador and to capture its leaders in order to prevent the campesino masses from joining the revolutionary movement.

Who Is Present Running The Agrarian Reform?

We have already shown that the military—that is, the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces— is in control of the government and of the Agrarian Reform process at the highest decision-making level. The question remains: who is in fact administering this reform? In one sense, the answer might appear to be either the Ministry of Agriculture (MAG) or the Agrarian Transformation Institute (ISTA). The official reform structure looks like this:

A. CENTRAL DECISION-MAKING LEVEL

- Leaders of MAG and the President of ISTA
- The High Command of the Salvadorean Armed Forces

B. — ISTA, headed by an Administrator... 39

But when we examine the text of the reform decree, we find that in fact:

The determination of the right to reclamation and the payments to be made according to the class of land will be determined by ISTA...

Once ISTA has taken possession of the affected property, the legal owner, occupier or representative * should report to ISTA to sign an act of intervention and possession-making. ⁴⁰

These are administrative tasks, underscoring the fact that ISTA and MAG have functional not decision-making powers. Furthermore, both the last minute assignment of ISTA to the reform process and the relatively high-level positions given to the leaders of the UCS--such as Rodolfo Viera and Leonel Gomez who head ISTA--suggest that ISTA and UCS are being used by the Junta de Gobierno to give some modicum of grass-roots campesino legitimacy to the reform.

More helpful in probing the question of who is giving and taking orders in this reform process was the exchange that occurred on March 6, 1980 between an AIFLD representative and the Minister of Agriculture, Octavio Orrellana Solis. The AIFLD agent suggested that MAG should take two farms and use them as models and then "see how the whole thing worked out." Orrellana rejected the suggestion because MAG knew, according to one Salvadorean military officer, "the army wants this reform and we must do it with or without the cooperation of the civilians." ⁴¹ This indicates that forces at a higher level had set the reform into motion, such as the Supreme Command of the Army or the U.S. government. Apparently, AIFLD quickly fell into line.

There are other aspects of AIFLD's presence in El Salvador that also point to a much larger and more influential role for the Institute: the large numbers of AIFLD personnel--who entered El Salvador "in droves" after the coup ⁴² occupying the two top floors of the Hotel Sheraton on San Salvador; the recently renewed funding of AIFLD by USAID for around \$ 250,000 for fiscal 1980-81 even though the Institute has very weak links with the UCS at this point; the fact that Roy Prosterman--formerly associated with the "Land of the Tiller" pacification program in South Vietnam--has a direct phone connection with the Supreme Command; and, that a third Agrarian Reform decree has just been approved by the Salvadorean military which was developed by AIFLD... and which was

* Most landowners have left El Salvador and reside in Guatemala or Miami

approved without consultation with either the Ministries of Agriculture or Planning. It appears that AIFLD has become one of the U.S. government's main instruments for channeling its agrarian policy recommendations to the Salvadorean military. If so, this places AIFLD in open violation of the Memorandum of Understanding of June 1979.

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In spite of the fact that the U.S. government's strategy for El Salvador is creating a wasteland of the countryside, and in spite of the high-pressured propaganda machinery in the United States that continues to mouth inanities about "not knowing if it is the extreme right or the extreme left that is doing the killings,"⁴³ the agrarian reform plan in El Salvador is not working to the benefit of either the economy or of the mass of the campesinos. Furthermore, every day more and more government employees are joining the Frente Democrático and the Coordinadora Revolucionaria de Masas; every day another member of the Christian Democratic Party resigns. While the campesinos have been forced to flee from their homes and villages, they have not lost their resolve to resist the systematic terror that has been unleashed against them. Finally, increasingly the liberal sectors and the religious community is becoming more and more united with the workers and peasants. The sophisticated agrarian reform plan has been exposed for what it really is: another U.S. pacification program aimed at forcing some North American version of progress upon the Salvadorean people through force. The resistance grows, the popular revolutionary unity is consolidating more each day.

May 1, 1980
Washington, D.C.

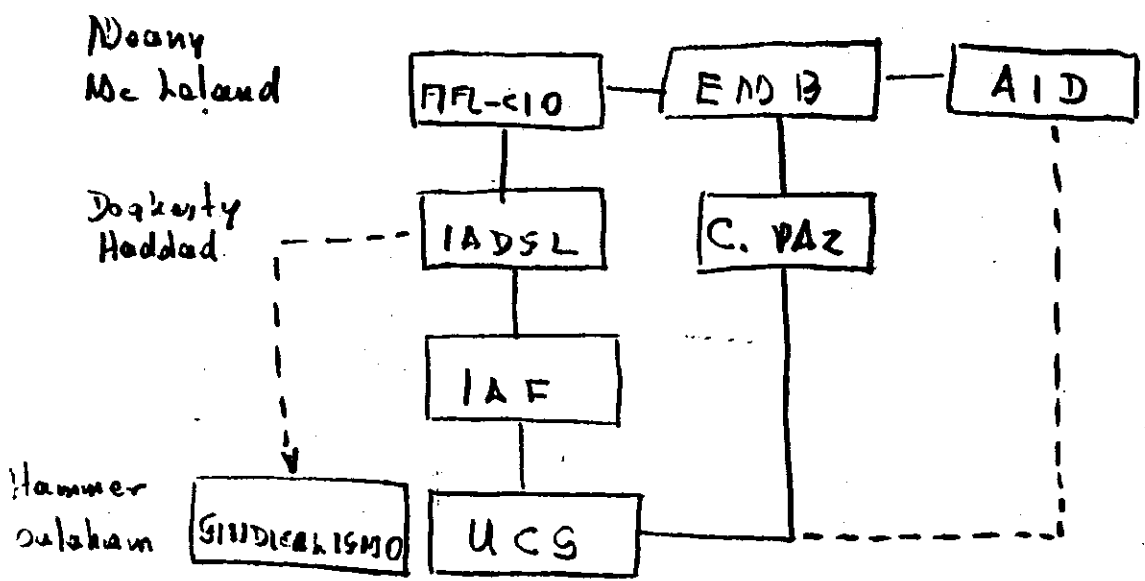
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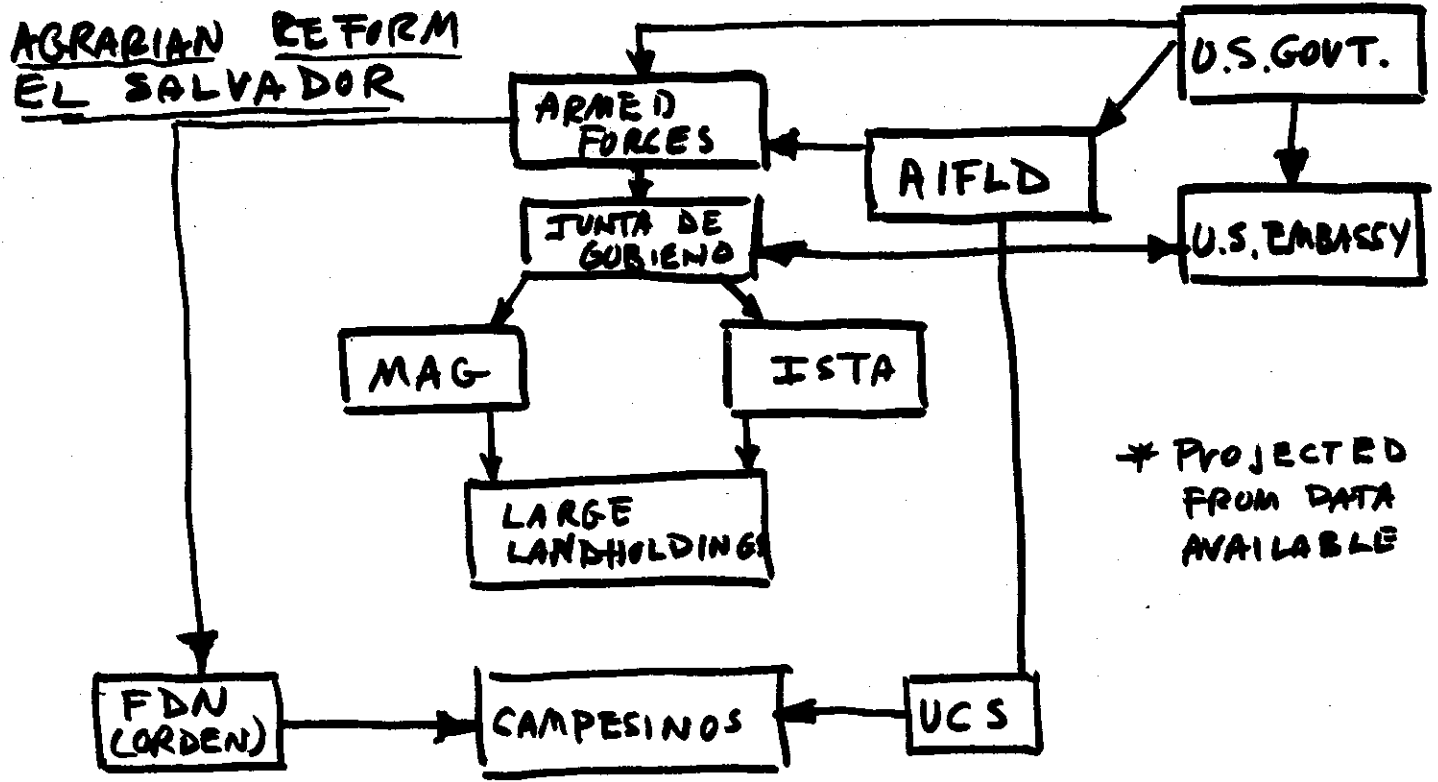
MEMORANDUM

CASA PRESIDENCIAL

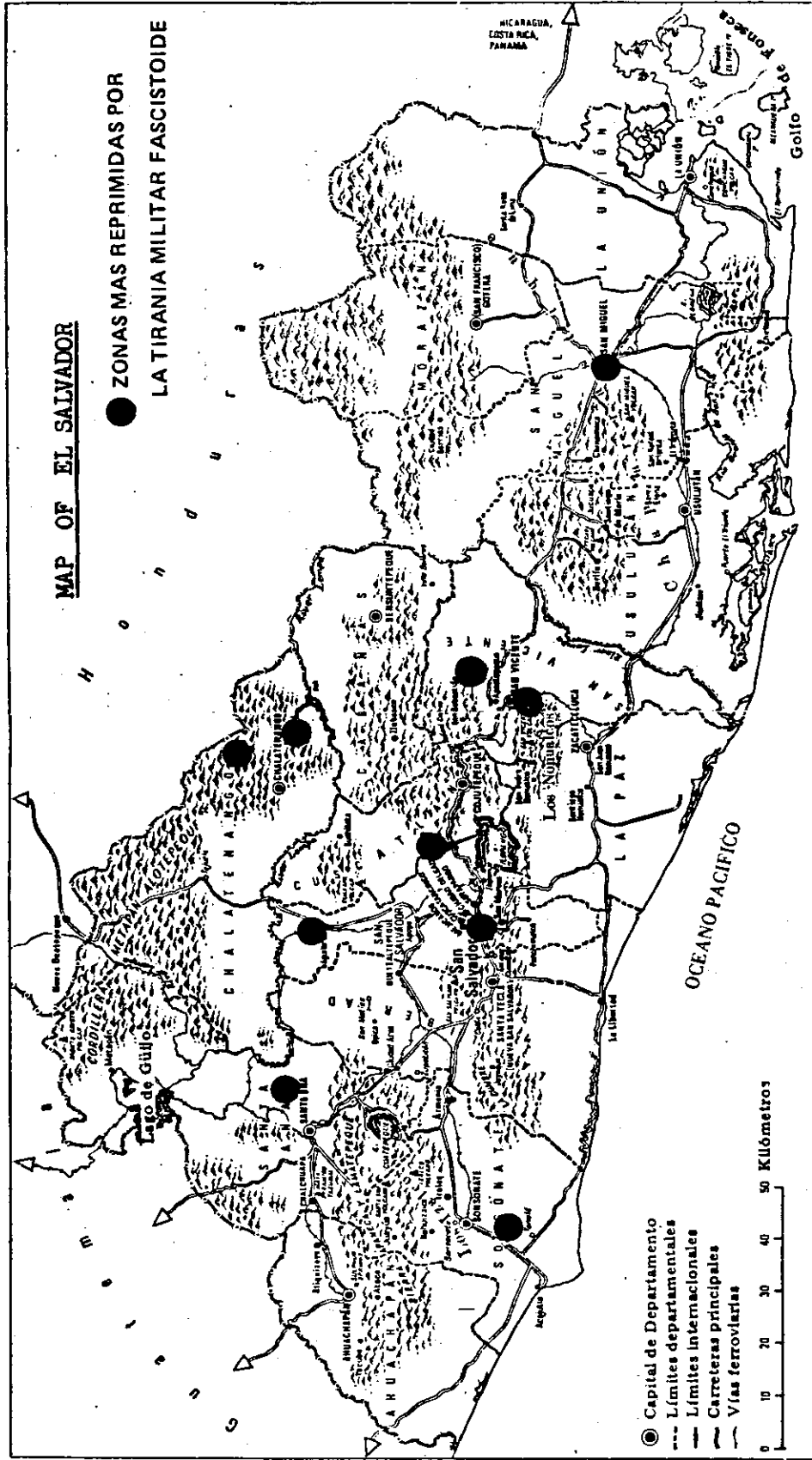


-- Copy of a sheet from a Memorandum pad in the President's House in San Salvador. Next to the AFL-CIO box are the names Meany and McLeland; next to IADSL (Spanish for AIFLD) are the names Doherty and Haddad; and next to Bindicalism (Unionism) are the names Hammer and Oulahan, all top officials of AIFLD and the AFL-CIO.

FLOW CHART - POWER RELATIONS*



* PROJECTED FROM DATA AVAILABLE



From Le Monde Diplomatique
September 1979

● The Zones Most Repressed By The
Fascist-like Military Tyranny