El Salvadoran health care workers resist privatisation of health industry 1999-2000

**Time period notes:** SIMETRISSS conducted strikes demanding salary increase and greater representation in liberalisation of health industry since first half of 1998. The 1999-2000 strike also preceded the first marcha blanca of 19th March 1998, to date, the biggest popular protest against privatisation of health systems in El Salvador.

16th November 1999 to 10th March 2000

**Country:** El Salvador  
**Location City/State/Province:** Nationwide

**Goals:** Retraction of plans to privatise health care system, raise in doctors’ salaries, rehiring of workers that were fired as a result of the strikes.

**Methods**

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 004. Signed public statements  > SIMETRISSS and STISSS signed agreement to have joint labour strikes; public sectors in MOLI also signed as supporters
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols  > "O paga, o se muere" (either pay or die)
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike  > by STISSS and SIMETRISSS
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols  > "O paga, o se muere" (either pay or die)
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches  > to Casa Presidencial by MOLI, peasant associations, and community groups
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols  > "O paga, o se muere" (either pay or die)
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
038. Marches › incl. ANDES-21 de Junio, AGEPYM, and STSEL
047. Assemblies of protest or support › by MSCCP and 25 NGOs in San Salvador, Chalatenango, San Vicente, and La Libcare
097. Protest strike › by MSCCP on 7th January
106. Industry strike
107. Sympathy strike › by power workers on 10th of January
116. Generalised strike › by newly formed Frente Sindical contra la Privatizacion

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › "O paga, o se muere" (either pay or die)
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › "O paga, o se muere" (either pay or die)
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › notably following the police clampdown on 6th of March
- 106. Industry strike
- 162. Sit-in

Notes on Methods:
I suspect that marches and rallies with banners and slogans would have been held in the 5th segment also, but have not been able to find sources explicitly stating this.

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Group characterization:

- Health care unions
- NGOs
- public sector labour
- students
- women's organisations

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
STISSS, SIMETRISSS

Partners:
Colegio Medico, MOLI, FMLN, Peasant associations, Community groups, Frente Sindical contra la Privatizacion, Movimiento de la Sociedad Civil contra la Privatizacion (MSCCP), public school teachers in ANDES-21 de Junio, municipal workers in AGEPYM, power workers in STSEL, MSPAS doctors and workers, doctors in private clinics, Las DIGNAS, Las Melidas (MAM), ORMUSA, Comunidades Rurales para el Desarollo de El Salvador (CRIPDES) (all four were women’s organisations).

External allies:
Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office

Involvement of social elites:
Jorge Schafik Handal, Huberto Centeno (FMLN legislative deputies)

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- Huberto Centeno (both on behalf of FMLN)
- Jorge Schafik Handal
- Las DIGNAS
- Las Melidas (MAM)
- ORMUSA
- Public sector unions in MOLI
- SIMETRISSS (Doctors’ union)
- STISSS (Workers’ union)

Groups in 2nd Segment:
- Peasant associations
- Community groups

Groups in 3rd Segment:
- Frente Sindical contra la Privatizacion
- Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office
- Movimiento de la Sociedad Civil contra la Privatizacion (MSCCP)
- Municipal workers in AGEPYM
- Power workers in STSEL
- Public school teachers in ANDES-21 de Junio

Groups in 4th Segment:
- MSPAS doctors and workers
- Doctors in private clinics

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 19 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
ARENA government led by Francisco Flores

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Blocking of road to President's home by police

Campaigner violence:
Not known.

Repressive Violence:
Tear gas, pepper spray, water cannons, and rubber bullets

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points

Survival:
0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
Government reneged on its promises to withdraw partial privatisation of hospitals less than five months after agreement was struck on March 2000.

Neo-liberalisation policies were central to the economic development plans of El Salvador since the 1980s. In the mid 1990s, the El Salvadoran government agreed to allow greater privatisation in basic social services in return for loans from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). In the late 1990s, El Salvador introduced the Salvadoran Institute of Social Security (ISSS) as part of the second phase of El Salvador’s liberalisation policies. In response, the public sector doctors’ part of the ISSS (SIMETRISSS) conducted strikes in the first half of 1998, demanding higher wages and greater voice in influencing the restructuring of the health system. SIMETRISSS gathered wide support for their 1998 strikes, enlisting enough protesters to fill ten blocks in the first marcha blanca (white march – demonstration where protesters wore white to support medical workers) on 19 March 1998. The main political opposition, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) also lent strength to the protests by actively bringing the health privatisation issue into the Health and Environmental Commission within the legislative assembly. The government eventually acceded to the doctors’ demands and allowed greater participation in health policies.

El Salvador’s new president in 1999, Francisco Flores, attempted privatisation of the public health system again. He announced plans to allow outsourcing of two hospitals as part of a pilot program. The government did not consult the doctors before making these plans. In response, almost 12,500 workers in the SIMETRISSS and the workers union under the ISSS (STISSS) agreed to strike on 14 November 1999. Under the
strikes, the workers admitted no new patients and only treated emergency cases. The unions called for the retraction of plans for health care privatisation, increase in salaries of doctors, and later, the rehiring of health workers laid off as a result of the ensuing strikes. Eighteen public sector unions under the Movement of Integrated Labor Organizations (MOLI) also signed in support. One week after the strikes began, FMLN legislative deputies, Jorge Schafik Handal and Humberto Centeno, expressed their public support for the strikes.

In the midst of the strikes, STISSS and SIMETRISSS organised marches with greater participation from unions and community groups. On 8 December 1999, the unions, with the support of peasant organisations, community groups, and NGOs, held a march towards the presidential residence. The protesters flew banners with slogans “O Pago o se muere” – “either pay or die.” The protesters’ slogans made the issue of health privatisation real for many members of the public which helped galvanise a broader public appeal. President Flores refused to meet with the marchers. On 4 January, unions within MOLI formed the coalition Frente Sindical contra la Privatizacion to better coordinate protest against privatisation and outsourcing of public services. The coalition held work stoppages in seven government departments on 13 January 2000. In addition, NGOs founded the Movimiento de la Sociedad Civil contra la Privatizacion (MSCCP) on 7 January. This coalition included workers from the treasury department, water and pension system services, and the energy sector, all of which held solidarity strikes and work stoppages. The MSCCP also organised protest caravans in San Salvador, Chalatenango, San Vicente, and La Libertad. The protesters held a second mass march on 14 January, and they were joined by the public school teachers in the organization ANDES-21 de Junio and workers in the General Association of Public and Municipal Employees (AGEPYM) and the Union of Electrical Sector Workers (STSEL). Peasant organisations from major cities of El Salvador were also able to participate after the Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office helped marchers reach the rally by removing police road blockades.

By February, the campaign against health privatisation included not just the unions, but also doctors and medical workers in private clinics. The coordination of the strikes by workers in the two fields shut down hospitals nationwide, affecting all fourteen departments. Unionists continued to hold rallies and marches continued to be held in major towns and cities, including San Vicente, San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel, and Zacatecoluca.

In early March, workers from eighteen public hospitals in the Ministry of Public Health and Social Service (MSPAS) joined in the campaign. Then on 6 March, riot police attacked protesters staging a sit-in in front of the largest public hospital in El Salvador (ISSS Surgery Hospital and Hospital Rosales). The police fired tear gas, pepper spray, water
cannons, and rubber bullets. When tear gas entered the hospital, some patients suffered cardiac seizures. The health care unions responded with a mass demonstration on 8 March. Approximately 50,000 marched to the home of the president. The police stopped the marchers a few blocks before they reached their destination.

Finally, on 10 March, the government explicitly agreed not to continue its privatisation plans in an agreement with the health care unions. The FMLN went on to achieve their greatest electoral victory in the following elections on 16 March for their support of the strikes, winning the most parliamentary seats and eight provincial capital elections out of fourteen. Although the workers managed to extract privatisation concessions, the government reneged on the deal three months later. The government also refused salary raises for health care workers, and did not rehire the workers fired as a result of the strikes.

Research Notes

Influences:

SIMETRISSS also held strikes in 1998 protesting the low salaries of doctors and the insufficient doctors’ representation in privatisation policies (1).

The strikes of 1999-2000 laid foundation to the major health privatisation strikes held in 2002-2003 (2).

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
El Salvadoran health care workers resist privatisation, health industry 1999-2000