

# Central American Awareness Week



Valle-Garay at last Thursday's forum.

## El Salvadorean Teacher Vilma Soto

by Louisa Vermeer

Central American Awareness Week continued last Wednesday afternoon with guest speaker Vilma Soto of the National Association of El Salvadorean Teachers.

Having been a teacher in El Salvador, her presentation was an account of the teachers' movement for better working conditions and the subsequent government oppression of all intellectual elements in the country.

Soto was forced to flee El Salvador due to her involvement as a teacher and as a founding member of the teachers' union.

The Teachers' Union has its membership with the FDR (The Revolutionary Democratic Front) and in conjunction with the FMLN (guerilla organization), the forces in opposition to the ruling junta.

"Before 1964 the teachers were exploited by the regime. The average monthly salary at that time was \$20-\$30 with no extra benefits," said Soto.

"The teachers had no say in education programs and were forced to take part in party demonstrations."

She went on to describe the events that took place from when the teachers first organized themselves in 1965 to the legaliza-

tion of the teachers' union and their major strikes in 1968 and 1971. The strikes were met by government resistance as 660 schools have since been shut down. The University of El Salvador has been closed for the past three years. Presently, 47 per cent of the population is illiterate.

"Over 312 teachers have been murdered, some in front of their students, 24 have disappeared and over 3000 have been expelled," Soto stated. "There have been no new teachers in El Salvador for the last ten years."

"The main office of the teachers has been taken over three times in two years. The militia has stolen equipment and the names and addresses of the associated members to track them down," she explained.

"Many teachers have fled the

country. Others sleep in different houses each night."

Soto is presently a member of a Salvadorean refugee organization based in Mexico, called Andes. Several teaching centers for Salvadorean refugees have been set up in Mexico.

She is participating in an educational tour across Canada, as other members are touring the U.S. and countries surrounding El Salvador. Their aim is to gain the support of governments, teachers' unions, and other organizations of various other countries, and in doing so, pressurizing the junta to reopen the schools and stop the oppression of Salvadorean intellectuals.

Mrs. Soto has thus far appealed to The Teachers for Social Justice, in Toronto, Congress, and the Confederation of Quebec Teachers.

To date she has received a very positive response from these organizations and is now in the process of making a direct appeal to the Canadian government.

Photo: Martine Beales

## Representative of the FDR-FMLN Pedro Cedillos

by Neil Fenna

"We will not give one inch back until the Yankees are thrown out," declared Pedro Cedillos, representative of the FDR-FMLN in Canada. The FDR-FMLN is the guerilla organization fighting the military junta in El Salvador. His speech Friday was the last in a series presented as highlights of the Central American Awareness Week on campus.

Cedillos provided a background to the current conflict in El Salvador. He said insurrection first appeared in the country in 1932, with the shortage of land being at the root of the trouble. Fifty years later the population has more than tripled; the land is still the same. Armed guerrilla warfare has only existed since 1970, when the people began to abandon hope for a pacific solution to their plight.

The FDR political coalition has never abandoned hope for a political solution, but is currently boycotting elections in El Salvador. There have been numerous elections in the "fifty years of tyranny", but they are always victories for the representatives of the armed forces.

In 1972 the coalition actually "won" the election, but the results were altered in favor of the military. Cedillos called the electoral process "an instrument to fool our people."

In 1972 the people of El Salvador began looking in earnest at alternative solutions. The FMLN emerged as a fighting force. Using M-3 and M-16 guns and other American hardware taken from the regime's army or bought on the black market, they began their drive for control of the country.

The FMLN are slowly grinding down the forces arrayed against them. It is only a question of "When," Cedillos said, for "the people will inevitably win."

The FDR-FMLN now controls a third of the country. In the controlled zones, comprehensive change has been brought in to

rebuild the social structure. Through direct election, committees have been established to run each and every community. Each leader is elected for his work for the community, not for his power or oratory skill.

In Chatalenango province a regional council has been elected from amongst the community leaders. These various political groups are responsible for everything in their areas, from commerce and defence to combating alcoholism to feeding the people. In the controlled zones, the emphasis is on communal effort and security, while in the zones controlled by the military it is "every man for himself," said Cedillos.

A "normal life" is emerging out of the old chaotic structure, orchestrated by the people themselves.

The presence of fifty thousand American troops in adjoining Honduras, the presence of 'gunboats' (such as the 60,000 ton aircraft-carrier USS *Ranger*) in the area and the visit of the U.S. Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger clearly illustrate the strategic importance of El Salvador to the United States.

They also reflect growing American apprehension for the ability of the ruling oligarchy to keep power: Cedillos said "they are afraid."

The United States justifies its involvement in the area by various versions of the "communist subversion/domino" theory combined with their vision of Central America as their rightful "backyard."

Cedillos dismissed the first reasoning as a "curtain of smoke" designed to "create domestic paranoia to justify intervention and to get international support." He said that the war was not one of ideologies but rather one of simple economics: "it is the people of El Salvador without shoes and with empty stomachs taking up the fight."

Cedillos explained American involvement in terms of the second reason put more explicitly: exploitation. He said that the United States sees Central America as a "fountain of money": a source of natural resources and a market for manufactured goods. "The multinationals suck the (economic) life out of Central America," he said.

It is to protect the interests of corporations that the U.S. is involved, according to the FDR. To do this they must have the governments of the entire region under control.

To make sure that El Salvador does not fall out of their hands, the U.S. is pouring financial aid (to the tune of \$800 million) and military supplies into the country to prop up the government.

There are U.S. Army "advisors" in El Salvador, but they are not merely educating the armed forces in the operation of military hardware, as the Reagan Administration claims. Cedillos told of one Marine teaching El Salvadoran troops how to 'take a baby out of its mother's arms and put it in a hot oven to die'. The advisors are "dehumanizing the military," he said.

Cedillos claimed that the El Salvadoran military has sophisticated helicopters, artillery and planes at its disposal, and is also using "white phosphorus gas" in the guerilla-controlled zones. The Americans claim the Soviets are using gas against the rebels in Afghanistan.

Even in the face of "barbarity", the guerrillas are still willing to negotiate. Cedillos said that while the FDR proposes a "dialogue of negotiations" — to discuss reform of the government, the armed forces and the economy as well as establish a ceasefire — the Americans and the regime are only interested in a "military solution". A recent meeting between the FDR-FMLN and U.S. special envoy Richard Stone promised nothing but further discussions.

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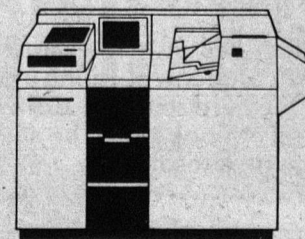
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