Written by Erica Thompson
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Autonomia Mural: Oswaldo NatarénInterview with Oswaldo Natarén of the University Front of Roque Dalton, National University of El Salvador

Oswaldo Natarén is an artist, activist, and co-founder of the University Front of Roque Dalton (FURD), a leftist student group at the National University of El Salvador (UES). Formed in 2002, FURD's purpose is to actively challenge the University's approach to administration, organization, admissions, and curriculum, as well as its overall role and participation in society.

The UES is El Salvador's only public University and the school admits 45,000 students each year. Part of the FURD's work is to help gain admissions for students who've been rejected by the University for various reasons, typically concerning lack of money and low test scores. The group also organizes with current students, campus workers, and professors to unify under the common goal of University reform. They envision "a University that reflects, critiques, and transforms society."

A more in-depth interview with current members of the FURD is forthcoming. The purpose of this interview with Natarén, recent graduate and veteran youth organizer, is to give U.S. activists a brief introduction to the FURD's analysis in a long history of oppression and resistance at the UES, a closer look at El Salvador's coyuntura (situation, or combined

political and social forces in play), and an understanding of organized leftist youth expectations of the FMLN.

UDW: Tell us a little bit about the founding of the FURD and why you chose Roque Dalton as a historic figure to identify with?

ON: The FURD was envisioned as a new chapter in the ongoing response of students in the National University to organize ourselves and to uncover the UES' historic role in El Salvador's revolutionary movement. The political project of the FURD arose in 2002 out of a collective need to continue that struggle. The group continues to explore and affect the life of the University through these objectives: to examine the other side of the history that is taught to us; to discover that there are many of us who think differently than the way society has trained us (as this is the case, we often think differently than one another); and to articulate both what the University's role in society is at the moment and what it could be.

The group's name is inspired by the revolutionary Salvadoran poet, Roque Dalton Garcia. Roque was an untiring social fighter, poet, and important political architect of the revolutionary movement in El Salvador. He completed his University training at the UES and then went on to create a great literary legacy in his time of struggle throughout the 1960s and 1970s, until his assassination at age 39. It was necessary to recover the name of this poet and his struggle because of the political and personal essence of his work.

[redacted] (National Republican Alliance) [redacted] has ruled the country, Salvadorans have faced a very difficult situation. Poverty has increased under the ARENA government and policies of social exclusion have been maintained. When the government began implementing neoliberal policies in the mid-90s - including the privatization of banks, electricity, pensions and other institutions of social benefit - El Salvador entered a new period of economic crisis. Many compatriots have been forced to leave the country in search of a basic means of survival.

Dollarization and free trade - new instruments of the neoliberal agenda - have created fallout and have enhanced the crisis. Unemployment is a determining factor. We have a very large rate of unemployment this year, exceeding the rates of previous years. This is to say that every year, the ARENA government has increased unemployment in this country and, by extension, increased violence.

Violence in El Salvador has risen as a result of the disintegration of families and local economies. The government has not had a logical response. When violent crime increases, it is the role of the government to create plans to address root causes, not new ways to fight crime. The increased levels and the types of crimes being committed are the results of previously failed plans.

The Super Mano Dura (Iron Fist) plan has only increased violence and

could not have had any other outcome. As a result of Mano Dura, more people have become gang members and the prison population has exploded. Criminal actions have become more complex, so that now we see a big rise in organized crime, which is one of the determining factors of how the ARENA party has governed.

This gives us a more complex picture of the conditions the four hundred thousand families in our country have to face. The informal sector is the largest source of work, which cannot be considered a generator of employment but rather a last resort for the unemployed.

During elections, political parties offer alternative solutions to social problems and this year the Left in the country, the FMLN, presented to the people a better plan. People like us-who are social activists and have been emerging throughout the many years of social struggle-have generated good expectations among the population as we have moved through and beyond the hard years of war by continuing to organize.

UDW: Given the history of State violence and economic sabotage in El Salvador, the political entrenchment of the right wing, and pressure from industrialized nations, what can the FMLN reasonably accomplish over the next five years that would be a marked shift away from the status quo and towards greater autonomy?

ON: The new government should be focused on throwing out the old schemes implemented by ARENA. ARENA has created a neoliberal system - a system that gives priority to individualism. The market gives priority to profit before anything

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Erica Thompson is a media correspondent for CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador). To find out what you can do in the U.S. to support the people's movement and to take action against U.S. intervention in El Salvador, visit: www.CISPES.org or call (202)521-2510.