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Working-Class Water Justice: Salvadoran *Sindicalistas* and the Fight for a “Just and Dignified Life”

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ABSTRACT: El Salvador is one of the rainiest countries in Latin America, but it is also one of the most water stressed. State negligence and lack of effective regulation of industrial, agricultural and domestic discharge has meant that, for decades, effluent has flowed unchecked into El Salvador’s freshwater bodies. Today, around 90% of the country’s surface water is contaminated. Various important Salvadoran social movements have rallied around socio-ecological concerns that include protecting public goods, services, land and water from contamination and from the encroachments of privatisation. Among them, the environmental movement is the most prominent. While not centred on water justice struggles, Salvadoran unions continue to play a major role in campaigns against austerity. This article focuses on the Salvadoran labour movement. It observes the ways in which unions have folded water-related concerns into the broader economic and workplace demands. Water justice is complex, diverse and multifaceted and must be approached from different perspectives. In this article, I argue for a working-class water justice framework that uses strategies such as strikes, work stoppages and collective bargaining to secure demands for improved infrastructure, higher wages, and to protect public services like the water network.

KEYWORDS: Water justice, labour unions, political ecology, infrastructure, El Salvador

INTRODUCTION

Despite receiving between 1000 and 2500 mm of rain per year, El Salvador continues to be one of the most water-stressed countries in Latin America. For decades, the absence of state regulation on water discharge meant that most of El Salvador’s industrial, agricultural and domestic effluent gushed untreated into rivers and coastal areas (Patterson and López, 2013). Today, around 90% of the country’s surface water is contaminated and none of the main rivers can be purified, filtered or chlorinated enough to be safe for human consumption (Gies, 2018). Salvadorans experience regular service interruptions and receive exorbitantly high water bills, sometimes more than 400% higher than the previous month’s bill. Legal battles to secure clean, dependable and affordable drinking water are a terrain of struggle for Salvadoran environmental movements; for years, they led a protracted fight to establish comprehensive water legislation that would address service interruptions, contaminated tap water, and high costs for consumers. This legal battle came to an end when the current president Nayib Bukele codified El Salvador’s first comprehensive water policy, the Ley de Recursos Hídricos (Law of Water Resources). Despite the bill being hailed for its ability to "guarantee the human right to water for Salvadoran citizens", water issues have not improved (Legislative Assembly Press, 2021).

Members of the Salvadoran environmental movement held press conferences condemning legal decisions by the Bukele administration where they highlighted the deficiencies in the new water law. Environmental activism continued after the law’s implementation, though at a diminished scale compared to the level of water justice activism in 2018. That year – after conservative legislators proposed privatising the entire water network – environmentalists rallied a broad-based, cross-class coalition in support of keeping the water system in public hands. Even after the Law of Water Resources went into effect, broad social movements have continued to mobilise for socio-economic justice in El

Salvador. The labour movement, which includes unions from economic sectors as varied as sanitation and domestic workers, has rallied thousands in support of working-class issues that cut across workplace, economic and environmental arenas. During the International Workers' Day march in 2023, labour leaders, speaking from the stage, declared that,

We are here today celebrating as the working-class, defending our labour rights, and demanding respect for *sindicalistas* [trade unionists]! Our most basic goods are being privatised, and nobody asked us about privatising our water, our services. But us, the working-class, we are the ones that produce wealth. And labour organisations, unions, we are the *instrumento de lucha* [instrument for struggle] for the dignity of the working-class. We demand a just and dignified life!¹

Sentiments like these have been ubiquitous. Salvadorans are discontented with the Bukele administration for many reasons including the cost-of-living crisis, repression of oppositional voices, and the ongoing water crisis. Labour unions, especially those who provide social services to Salvadorans across the country, spoke to issues of dignity and justice that are not constrained to the current moment but are at the heart of working-class struggles. As was apparent that day, water issues in El Salvador are as important to labour unions as workplace and economic concerns.

This article explores the role of the labour movement in the ongoing water struggle. Unlike the Salvadoran environmental movement, labour was not directly involved in the battle over a water law, however the labour movement cares deeply about water justice because it sees it as fundamental to social and economic justice. Salvadoran labour unions, particularly those representing health care workers, have historically played a major role in campaigns against austerity and privatisation (Almeida, 2008). The market reforms of the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) have increasingly encroached on the environment, and activists have proposed more sustainable pathways for development (Spalding, 2014: 96). As I learned through interviews and participant observation, unions have folded water-related concerns into broader workplace demands. The tactics that trade unionists use to secure water demands – work stoppages, strikes, marches and collective bargaining – are about reclaiming control over how their lives are spent. I thus argue that unions engage a working-class water justice that demands investment in public infrastructure and seeks power over working conditions, social reproduction and free time. These strategies all serve to ensure what unionists call a "just and dignified life".

My analysis draws on 13 months of qualitative dissertation field research carried out in El Salvador's capital, San Salvador, over three fieldwork periods: eight weeks in June and July 2019, eight weeks in June and July 2021, and nine months between August 2022 and May 2023. I used a mix of qualitative methods which included document analysis, semi-structured interviews (n = 54), participant observation at marches, as well as press conferences and *conversatorios* (conversations or discussions) that were organised by social movements. I also interviewed representatives from 20 public and private sector unions and worker organisations. In what follows, I will situate my study within the literature on social movements and water justice which addresses infrastructure, privatisation and temporal justice. I will briefly describe labour activism in El Salvador's historiography, both during and after the civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1992. I will then turn to my case study, addressing concerns that workers have with the water crisis, which were largely focused on infrastructure, cost, and health. I will describe interviews with unions representing construction workers, electricians, teachers, clerical staff, *maquiladora* (factory) workers, police and domestic workers. I will then outline the various strategies that unions have used to secure water-related demands. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which water concerns weave through the geographies of working-class life and the implications of a working-class water justice.

¹ Author's fieldnotes, 1 May 2023.

Working-class water justice includes the role of unions and other formal and informal labour organisations that identify as working-class. According to Raju Das (2022: 1080), the working-class is defined as,

a group consisting of people who lack control of production, depend on the sale of their labour power to obtain access to their means of subsistence to survive, have to surrender a large part of what they produce to those who control the means of production in the workplace (i.e. capitalists), and have little control over production, exchange, and state power.

What is not explicitly outlined above is the role of informal workers who are often paid very low wages, are subject to precarious and dangerous working conditions, and who make up half the global workforce (Davis, 2006; Hummel, 2021). Based on my own fieldwork, these circumstances figure into what a working-class water justice would look like because it would address the rising costs of water services and the dilapidated water infrastructure that impacts Salvadorans at home and work.

WORKERS AND WATER

Environmentalism is often narrowly construed as a middle-class issue, but working-class labour movements have long recognised the inseparable nature-labour relation (Räthzel et al., 2021; Montrie, 2024). Union struggles for justice have a long history of campaigns that are concerned with occupational safety and with environmental determinants of health (Bell, 2020). An early champion of worker justice was the vice president of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, Tony Mazzocchi; he argued for worker control over production, social and safety protections, and an expansion of the welfare state (Leopold, 2007; Huber, 2022). This labour-led environmentalism differs slightly from Martinez-Alier's (2003) 'environmentalism of the poor', where marginalised and rural, Global South communities mobilised themselves to protect against the environmental degradation that was disrupting livelihoods. Environmentalism of the poor has since been revisited to incorporate urban justice movements that actively campaigned against waste dumping and contamination, water privatisation, real estate speculation, and gentrification (Romano, 2012; Anguelovski and Martinez-Alier, 2014; Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

Water justice bridges concerns of socio-economic inequity with questions of access, distribution, and quality of water resources, foregrounding the specific ways water injustice is embedded and situated (Boelens et al., 2018). Subpar water infrastructure conditions are illustrative examples of the uneven geographies of water access (Wilson et al., 2019), mediating where water does and does not flow, revealing the relational political dynamics in decision making and management (Gandy, 2014; Jepson et al., 2017). For poor people, decrepit and dangerous infrastructure is often the only option, and when alternatives are available, they take the form of expensive and complex networks of pipes, pumps, tankers and/or bottled water (Truelove and O'Reilly, 2021; MacFarlane, 2023). In the Global South, women and girls are commonly made responsible for collecting household water, and risk daily material and emotional challenges (Sultana, 2011). Technologically sophisticated water infrastructure such as desalination is sometimes posited as a solution to the challenge of access, though others argue that it in fact gives rise to further water injustice (Velásquez and Wachtendorf, 2023). Many Salvadorans experience acute water injustice through unsuitable infrastructure, with workers often having to make do with inadequate and fractured potable water service networks. Union representatives argue that repairs and upkeep are the responsibility of the state, especially considering that – as one representative from a clerical workers union told me in 2023 – "El Salvador is one of the most urbanised cities in Latin America, and so we should have a more secure water network, yet some communities still have to go to rivers and streams, even though 90 percent of that water is contaminated".

Water justice movements mobilise to fight for more control over access to water, drawing attention to global struggles against neoliberal austerity and privatisation (van den Berge et al., 2018; Magdahl and

Jordhus-Lier, 2020; Muehlebach, 2023). A prominent example of this is the European Right2Water movement, which garnered nearly two million signatures that called for the development of legislation ensuring the human right to water and sanitation and the remunicipalisation of water services across member states (McDonald and Swyngedouw, 2019). In the US context, Borgias and Barry (2024) observe the strategic alliances that have formed between stakeholders in California and Nevada who would appear, at first glance, to be unlikely collaborators but between whom linkages formed over shared visions of water justice, allocation and accountability.

My own critique is less about the utility of these partnerships – which I support and would like to see strengthened – and more about what pressure points these social actors can utilise in the struggle for water justice. Labour unions are often considered to be one part of a multifaceted coalition where workers hold the same weight as members of other civil society groups. In McAlevey's (2016) "power structure analysis" (a mechanism for understanding one's own power and that of one's opponent), she argued that worker power is in fact not equal to that of other stakeholders. Because workers can withhold their labour, as a social group they can impose serious economic pressure on the employer class; this can be strategically leveraged to secure social demands. Broad based coalitions are fundamental to the fight for equality and considering how workers can disrupt economic production and profit making, I use McAlevey's framework to argue for the inclusion of union strategies in the suite of tactics that can be used to secure water justice.

Across the US, Latin American and Europe, public sector unions have a long history of fighting against the privatisation of public services. This includes unions representing workers in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors, as well as employee associations in the informal sector (Lopez, 2001; Perreault, 2006; Bakker, 2007; Barca and Leonardi, 2018; Etchemendy, 2020). Social movement unionism is a useful framework for capturing the convergence of labour and community mobilisation because it combines workplace struggles with demands for policy change and democratisation (Barchiesi, 2007; Upchurch and Mathers, 2012; Magdahl and Jordhus-Lier, 2020). Geographers further this analysis by considering how space and scale complement and complicate each other within social movement unionism, particularly when local environmental movements and global labour federations unite against neoliberal urban water services (Magdahl, 2022). Nonetheless, public sector unions are decisive in urban water policy debates when they link workplace issues with broader social demands for better water quality, access and control (Nelson, 2017). Unions are also a driving force in defining the meaning of 'public water'. As González Rivas and Schroering (2021) described, unions representing workers in Pittsburgh's water and sewage utility conceptualised a public water framework that demanded government accountability and transparency, green infrastructure improvements, and good union jobs in the water utility.

A public water framework must also address social reproduction where continued access to safe, reliable water is essential. The considerable work on water justice, gender, and social reproduction reveals how questions of inequality are wrapped up with notions of exclusion, poor health, and restricted social mobility (Ahlers and Zwarteven, 2009; Truelove, 2011; Sultana, 2011, 2020). Protecting the ability to socially reproduce oneself is a central tenet of environmental justice, and scholars have demonstrated how water's commodification and dispossession shape and constrain opportunities for social reproduction (Di Chiro, 2008; Roberts, 2008). According to Fernandez (2018: 145), social reproduction is broadly defined as, "the labour and set of social processes and relationships that support production, exchange, and the maintenance of individuals, households, and communities". Too often, the production/social reproduction dichotomy manifests as a (false) distinction between work and home, where households are considered areas of leisure that are devoid of work. This undervalues the overlap and merging of production and reproduction in the home (Winders and Smith, 2019). Lack of access to water occurs at home and at work and Salvadorans hardly separate its impacts; in interviews, they stated plainly that, "one can't do anything without water".

WATER JUSTICE AS TEMPORAL JUSTICE

Time is inextricably linked with justice, and working-class politics are a constant struggle to reclaim time from capitalism's project of extending the working day (Huber, 2022). Workers are made to expend more time and energy in the workplace with little recourse because they do not own or control their own means of production. The effort required to access sufficient clean water further squeezes their free time and energy and complicates the "consistently and productively blurred" space and time of production and social reproduction (Mitchell et al., 2003: 416). Workers' experience of the water crisis is fundamentally about time, that is, time spent repairing infrastructure, fetching water, contesting expensive bills, and waiting at health clinics to address physical issues related to poor water quality. These unpredictable, time-consuming responsibilities pose challenges for working-class people and often require them to use work time to address water issues, potentially leading to lost wages. Spending leisure time confronting shortages or contamination of water also makes it difficult or even impossible to plan for childcare, family, or social commitments. Globally, water justice movements call for more equitable regimes of valuation which place affordability, accessibility and fair pricing at their centre (Muehlebach, 2023). Because time is a structuring force for working-class people, these systems must equally include temporal justice as an important facet of water struggles.

Time is power-laden, and, in some cases, it is imposed by nation states as a disciplinary mechanism (Cohen, 2018). As sociologist Javier Auyero (2012) argues, the experience of waiting constitutes a daily exercise in denial of rights for poor and working-class people. Salvadorans are constantly made to wait, including when they demand that the state or employers improve the water network, when they try to address excessive water charges, or when they attempt to remedy poor water quality. The power imbalance between workers and owners means that time for working-class people is often experienced as precarity (Bear, 2016). The Salvadoran water crisis is so severe that capitalists also confront disruptive shortages that require them to take time and energy out of their day to deal with related issues. The difference for working-class people, however, is that when they must leave work to attend to service interruptions at their children's schools or go to health clinics for gastrointestinal illnesses, this time is uncompensated. Unlike for owners of capital goods, it may also mean that workers risk losing employment with nothing to fall back on. Workers, of course, do not always passively submit to these injustices, and when they strike, they can inflict substantial economic pressure on the capitalist class in ways that other social groups structurally cannot. That is because workers can withhold their labour and stop economic production while demanding improvements to working conditions, wages and calling for support for environmentalism and conservation (Morse, 2020).

Social time is also mediated by water infrastructure, and infrastructure in disrepair can generate frustration, despair or anger, particularly when workers are made responsible for fixing it, whether in formalised work settings or through informal (often gendered) care work in the household (Ramakrishnan et al., 2021; Cairns, 2022). When water networks function properly, people enjoy a more reliable household supply and need to devote less time to collecting it (Crow, 2018). To reiterate, the ability to manage or decide how to use one's time is embedded in power relations. Water access and social power are co-constitutive, particularly in relation to capital accumulation and resource control (Swyngedouw, 2004; Linton and Budds, 2014); against this background, time is used as a tool to increase capital, and in the process, inequality and injustice are exacerbated (Auyero, 2012). Understanding water injustice for workers through the prism of time is useful because so much time is taken up by both productive labour and the unpaid labour that is necessary for reproducing oneself and one's family. While most of what I have described above constitutes ways to account for the monetary value of time for working-class people, time is also a subjective experience. Considering the stress caused by a water crisis, be it through fixing infrastructure or worrying about family health, that time is not spent in enjoyment, and the enjoyment of one's time contributes to one's happiness, health and wellbeing (Gershuny and Sullivan, 2019). I observe time as what Gilmore (2024) calls a non-renewable resource that still creates

value. The convergence of labour and time is a defining feature of working-class life, both in terms of production and social reproduction.

'Working people' as a category must also account for those who work at home without remuneration. In the context of water injustice, this includes homemakers and children who are not formally employed but who are nonetheless affected by water shortages, contamination and exorbitant expenses. In 2022, I spoke with Martina and Jesli, two representatives from a Salvadoran domestic workers union.² When asked how the water crisis impacts them at work, they explained that water shortages often result in the loss of waged domestic work. But the confluence of shortages, poor water quality, and large water bills are often even more common in their own households, where the bulk of the necessary labour is undertaken for the social reproduction of themselves and their families. During the interview, Martina explained that "the work at home still has to get done, and we are the ones who do it, so the water crisis is not just a problem for us as workers, but as women too". Working-class people are constantly reorganising the time for their uncompensated labour, and in El Salvador this uncompensated labour regularly includes addressing issues of quality or quantity caused by the water crisis. Water and temporal justice go hand in hand, and a working-class water justice framework would include strategies that allow all workers to have more free time.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MILITANT SALVADORAN LABOUR

Trade union environmentalism is not often at the centre of discussions and planning when considering how to organise and build solidarity movements for water justice; however, for unions and environmentalists there is overlap between strategies and demands. In what follows, I will outline a brief history of the Salvadoran labour movement, which developed over the two decades of the 1960s and 1970s and was instrumental in the formation of the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrilla insurgency (Álvarez, 2019). Labour's militancy was especially prominent during and immediately following the Salvadoran civil war (1980-1992). While labour action was not focused on ecological injustices, I highlight Salvadoran unions during this period in order to demonstrate their powerful structural position and their ability to pressure employers and the Salvadoran state to negotiate with workers. Unions, peasant movements, student activists and agrarian organisations deployed a range of mobilisation tactics ranging from marches to *tomas* (plant occupations) to strikes (Chávez, 2017). Interviewees explained that unions used to "come to collectively bargain *con fusiles* [with rifles]".

During the civil war, unions operating key sectors in El Salvador were the most militant. Workers in the national electrical utility and telecommunications unions would sabotage power substations, shuttering services temporarily and forcing employers to bargain (Almeida, 2008). These labour actions continued throughout the war despite intense military repression, until finally, in 1992, the Salvadoran government and the guerrilla insurgency signed a peace agreement (Gould, 2019). As I will elaborate further in my case study, union strategies were not deployed specifically for environmental demands, nor is labour any more or less affected by the water crisis in El Salvador than are members of other civil society groups. The labour movement's unique ability to disrupt business practice and profits through strikes or work stoppages, however, constitutes a repertoire of empowering and impactful actions that can be harnessed to push demands for water justice.

In Salvadoran labour history, the most militant unions were in the public sector. Public employees cannot directly stop the flow of profits to the capitalist class by engaging in strikes or work stoppages, but they can impose social and political crises on the state. After the civil war, public sector unions led labour actions that demanded an end to austerity and to the privatisation that was intensifying through neoliberal reforms by the right-wing National Republican Alliance (ARENA) (Fitzsimmons and Anner, 1999). Popular mobilisation against neoliberal reforms was most prominent in the health care system.

² All names in this article are pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

Three consecutive ARENA presidents attempted to privatise health care but each time they were met with massive public resistance from two health care workers unions, the Union of Workers of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (STISSS) and the Union of Medical Workers of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (SIMETRISSS). Despite the state's proclamations about efficiency and modernisation, by the late 1990s the Salvadoran population had grown sceptical about the upsides of privatisation. Electricity and telecommunications had already been privatised, resulting in a dramatic increase in energy costs and phone bills (Almeida, 2008).

Even in a time when collective action was relatively muted, some of the most significant protests in the era following the 1992 signing of the peace agreement were in response to the threat of privatised health care (Wade, 2016). Using marches, protests and months-long strikes, health care unions mobilised to improve wages and working conditions and to keep the health care system public. Health care workers received widespread support from the Salvadoran public and from other public and private sector unions who launched solidarity strikes, protests and road blockades across the country (Almeida, 2008). The largest of these actions took place in 2002, with 200,000 participants joining massive marches, carrying signs that read *O paga, o se muere* (Pay or die) (Amaya Umaña et al., 2006). The slogan captured a reality for Salvadorans: privatised health care would exclude most people.

In 2002, after years of struggle, health care workers in conjunction with the newly created FMLN political party pressured outgoing ARENA President Francisco Flores into signing a bill preventing privatisation (Government of El Salvador Legislative Assembly, 2002). While these anti-privatisation protests and strikes were arguably the largest collective actions in El Salvador's post-civil-war period, Salvadoran labour unions also mobilised against trade and investment policies that continued to weaken worker power (Human Rights Watch, 2003). In her study on how market liberalisation reshaped Central America, Spalding (2014) writes that some of the earliest critiques of CAFTA-DR came from the labour movement (particularly those in traditional manufacturing sectors) who called it a job destroyer. Salvadoran labour leaders fostered alliances with labour networks in the US and Mexico whose members, a decade earlier, had faced similar struggles against the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA (Almeida, 2008; Anner, 2011). The multiscale coalition against CAFTA-DR used its momentum to bolster energy around elections for the FMLN, which culminated in successive presidential victories in 2009 and 2014 (Almeida and González Márquez, 2023).

The 2009 election of FMLN president Mauricio Funes came at the height of the 'Pink Tide' – the political leftward trend in Latin America – and called into question decades of neoliberal policies. During my interviews, many workers marked these elections as a moment of revitalisation for labour unions and newly formed workers' movements, most notably in the public sector. Under Funes, labour laws were strengthened, public unions were given more organising protection, and new unions proliferated (Quintanilla Gómez, 2022). During the FMLN administrations, demands for environmental regulation also grew. The CAFTA-DR was signed in 2004 and ratified by its seven member countries over the next five years.³ The resulting market reforms facilitated interest in controversial areas of foreign investment such as gold mining (Spalding, 2014). After 2009, these policies gave way to a national anti-mining network that was concerned with how gold mining would affect water supply (Broad and Cavanagh, 2021; Artiga-Purcell, 2022). Labour supported a metal-mining ban, unconvinced by narratives claiming that gold mining would generate immense job growth in construction and manufacturing. They had learned from their union neighbours in Honduras who had suspended new mining permits in 2004 (Edenhofer, 2022), and whose activists had told the Salvadoran anti-mining coalition that mining brought, "maybe 100 jobs, but 50 will be only during measurement and construction. In one year, those people will be out of work. Outside experts will be brought in to fill jobs after the building is done" (Spalding, 2014: 165). In 2017, El

³ Member countries included El Salvador (2004), Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, United States (2005), Dominican Republic (2007), and Costa Rica (2009).

Salvador's anti-mining coalition successfully pressured its administration into banning metal mining in 2017, legislation that was the first of its kind in the world (Bebbington et al., 2019).⁴

From 2000, threats of water privatisation began to emerge. Given the impacts of privatisation on other public services, unions representing a cross-section of workers agreed that water must stay in public hands. From primary school teachers and university students to construction workers and electricians, unions supported the environmental movement and its efforts to codify a general water law that framed water as a human right, a publicly managed good, and called for fairer distribution and more-just pricing mechanisms (Calderón, 2018). In 2018, following announcements that the Legislative Assembly was on the verge of privatising water services, the environmental movement launched El Salvador's largest mass marches for water justice (Brigida, 2018). The participation of the labour movement was key to these protests. Municipal, water and sanitation workers, teachers and maquiladora workers marched to the Assembly alongside environmentalists, and together they demanded that the national water system remain in public hands (Laguan, 2018; see Figure 1). These mobilisations helped prevent the privatisation bill, though no further water legislation was considered until 2021, after Bukele's New Ideas party had replaced the FMLN and came to dominate the legislature.

Figure 1. Anti-water privatisation protests attended by members of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de ANDA union (SETA), which represent workers at El Salvador's water utility, the National Administration of Aqueducts and Sewers (ANDA)



Source: Calderón (2018).

Today, being a trade unionist under the Nayib Bukele administration is largely an experience of repression. In 2022, Bukele implemented a 'state of exception' policy in response to the spike in homicides that occurred after the collapse of secret gang negotiations with the government. This policy was meant to be only a thirty-day measure but has instead been renewed month-by-month and is now being used by the Bukele administration to suspend basic rights. Labour leaders and environmental activists contesting months of back pay, unsafe working conditions, or the human right to water have been jailed for supposed gang affiliations (Cuéllar, 2022; Ferrucci and Cabezas, 2023; Villarroel, 2023).

⁴ On 23 December 2024, President Bukele overturned the metal-mining ban, claiming this would boost economic growth. This decision was condemned by environmental and labour movements and by the very small minority of opposition politicians in the legislature.

Despite these serious threats, labour unions continue to make incremental gains and have secured back pay, bonuses, and improved working conditions. In the following section, I outline the specific concerns of unions related to water injustice and the specific strategies they've employed; teachers unions, for example, are utilising social media to expose decrepit water infrastructure and maquiladora unions are engaging in work stoppages to demand water filtration systems. I demonstrate that these demands and tactics are all directly or indirectly linked to water justice.

"THE BEST WAY TO PROTECT WATER IS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SERVICES"

In this next section, I will discuss how the water crisis affects workers and the different strategies they have adopted to incorporate water-related concerns into their broader economic and workplace demands. The first section is entitled Concerns. It details how the water crisis most impacts workers, focusing on anxieties related to infrastructure, cost and health. In the second section, entitled Strategies, I outline the different tactics that worker use to secure water demands, including temporary work stoppages, threats of strikes, mass marches, and collective bargaining.

Concerns

Infrastructure

Whether I was speaking with construction workers, teachers, health care workers, police or domestic workers, decrepit water infrastructure inevitably emerged as a serious issue. Across the Salvadoran waterscape, the impact of the water crisis on infrastructure reveals a host of inequalities. One of the most staggering examples of this is how old water infrastructure impacts public schools. I spoke with representatives from a primary school teachers union, a secondary education teachers union, and a union of workers at the University of El Salvador. All of them reported how decaying water infrastructure often resulted in burst pipes, chronic leaks, and unexplained water service interruptions.

Iván, a high school teacher, said that around 60% of schools were suffering from repeated water shortages since most pipes had passed their *vidas útiles* (useful lives). As Iván put it, "Our water infrastructure is totally collapsed and in desperate need of repair or replacement". El Salvador's aging water infrastructure is no secret, and teachers unions constantly demand more aggressive state investment (Martínez, 2022). Much less reported is the fact that teachers and parents spend their own money and time to repair water infrastructure. Iván explained that,

Our budget is so meagre that when we have a water leak or a pipe break, we have to ask parents and teachers to use their own money to buy new pipes and repair this kind of thing. It's come to the point where, even though the Constitution establishes a right to free education, we can't call it public school anymore because of the cost this [infrastructure] incurs on parents.

The relationship between public school teachers unions and the Ministry of Education (MINED) is fraught and the water crisis has exacerbated this tension. Under Bukele's administration, MINED refuses to increase the budget and fines schools that cancel classes temporarily because of burst water pipes or the suspension of water and sanitation services. According to MINED, educators are obligated to keep schools open for a certain number of days a year; as Iván explained, however, "they won't do anything about the infrastructure, even when we have no water service".

Burst pipes that lead to the suspension of classes are disruptive to students and teachers, but also to those who work outside the education sector. I interviewed Joél, whose union represents workers that provide legal humanitarian aid in the Salvadoran judiciary. He explained that at the judiciary, "they've dismissed us [from a day's work] several times because there was no running water. Other times, we must leave work to pick up our kids from school because there is no running water. Both times, we lose pay". He went on to say that even places as crucial as hospitals suffer from chronic water service

interruptions because of aging infrastructure. Indeed, in February 2023, the Salvadoran newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* reported that the Hospital El Salvador – the modern health facility built in 2020 with promises to be the largest and most advanced hospital in Latin America – had no potable water for four days (Alas, 2023). Nurses from that hospital told me they had dealt with water issues for a long time. As they put it, "We've had to ration water before, and it's not uncommon for us to have to bring in our own water to drink, wash our hands, even to sanitise our equipment. This has serious implications for diseases related to occupational health and safety".

While most of these conversations focused on infrastructure, we occasionally discussed the General Water Law. Workers, especially those in the public sector, expressed strong criticism of Nayib Bukele. This sentiment extended into sectors such as security, which are supposedly favoured by the president. Reynaldo, who represents the police and security workers union, told me that he used to be an avid supporter of Bukele, but that after seeing how the administration treated workers he became a vocal opponent of the president. After discussing working conditions and infrastructure, I asked Reynaldo about water legislation. He shared with me that police stations all over El Salvador have regular service interruptions. When discussing how working conditions, infrastructural disinvestment and water politics are intertwined, he noted:

Why don't we have a water law that the public deserves? Because the state would have to invest millions of dollars in water infrastructure and treatment, and economic interests don't want to do that. It hurts them to spend money on poor people, they don't see it as an investment. Not even for schools, for children who can't drink from the tap. Here, investment in water, in infrastructure is minimal.

Cost

In conversation, workers often disclosed their anxieties about the cost of their water bills. I attended a march in October for Salvadoran Unionist Day. Rank and file workers were quick to share what they thought about the water crisis. "Prices never stop going up here", a teacher named Miguel told me. "The water stops", he said, "but the bills never do".

In 2018, many unions fervently opposed water privatisation because of high costs. They worried that shifting the public water utility into private hands would worsen services and make them more expensive. Discussions about expensive water bills touched on concerns about the high prices of the Salvadoran *canasta básica*.⁵ As of 2024, the market basket for urban areas totalled around US\$245 a month, which represented a nearly 70% rise since 2014 (Alfaro, 2025). The minimum wage has meanwhile stagnated at around US\$375 a month, and monthly pension payments are even lower at US\$314 a month. As Joél told me, "The high cost of living, *canasta básica*, services like water, they all keep going up, and it's choking *el pueblo* [the people]".

Workers pointed out how households in San Salvador's affluent neighbourhoods often received much lower water bills. I spoke with Nora, the general secretary of non-academic workers at the University of El Salvador. She commented on the injustice of working-class people in poor neighbourhoods like Soyapango receiving water bills for almost US\$100, while residents in high-income neighbourhoods like Colonia Escalón receive water bills that are between US\$4 and US\$8 a month. She added that when expensive (and often unexplained) bills are not paid, services are shut off to poor households. As she put it, "It's unjust because people don't make enough money to pay those high bills".

Anxieties about the cost of water and about water services are tied to El Salvador's poor water quality. The country has some of the worst water quality in the Americas due to low levels of treatment, intensive use of agrichemicals, and weak regulation of industrial and domestic effluent (Patterson and López,

⁵ While there is no English equivalent term, 'market basket' is often used as a translation for *canasta básica*. It refers to the cost of a fixed bundle of basic household foods, goods and services, and is used to measure price changes and inflation (Block and Kouba, 2005).

2013). Consuming this contaminated water makes Salvadorans sick, which in turn leads to expensive visits to doctors and medical clinics. "The government says the water is potable, so we drink it at work and home, but then we get sick and have to go to the doctor", Luz, a union domestic worker, explained. "Those visits are expensive, so sometimes you just buy bottled water, but that's expensive too". Rates of death from diarrhoea doubled in 2022 (Aguilar et al., 2023), which health workers attribute to the underfunded potable water and sanitation infrastructure.

Health

The third most common concern was the impact of poor water quality on health. Like the concerns listed above, this issue affects both workers and their families. Poor water quality in schools – often coupled with aging, decrepit infrastructure – constitutes a serious barrier to learning for students and also means that they are constantly being sent home with gastrointestinal issues. Joél explained that the frequent water service interruptions meant that it was, "hard for workers who have to send their kids to schools with no water". When the water stops at their children's school, Joél and his colleagues often take unpaid time off from work to go pick them up. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this confluence of issues was even more pronounced. Representatives from the teachers union, *ANDES 21 de junio*, told me that during the pandemic the Bukele government implemented strict social distancing, masking, and quarantine measures and that, in schools, students were advised to thoroughly wash their hands, and teachers were instructed to constantly clean and sanitise their classrooms. But ANDES teachers asked me in frustration, "How are we supposed to wash our hands and sanitise the classrooms when there is no water?"

The Bukele administration has neglected important sectors such as education, so it is not a surprise that students and teachers suffer from health issues related to the poor water supply in schools. I was surprised to learn, however, that water issues persist even in areas the government claims to prioritise, such as security. For years, guards and police have complained about poor quality water in their workplaces. Reynaldo, from the security and police union, said that decrepit water infrastructure constantly impacts "workers' health and wallet". He blames the government and the National Administration of Aqueducts and Sewers water utility (ANDA). He insisted that, "The water coming through the pipes is unhealthy, too contaminated. To drink that water is very dangerous". Others have written about how lack of resources and limited institutional capacity impacts police in El Salvador. Political scientist Eduardo Moncada (2021) interviewed agents of the Salvadoran National Civil Police (PNC) and discovered that up to 20 stations in the greater San Salvador area were at risk of having their water shut off because the PNC could not pay the bills.

Across El Salvador, the confluence of crumbling water infrastructure, inability to pay bills, and growing water-related health concerns are familiar stories. An added challenge is the amount of time spent confronting the water crisis at home and at work. Salvadoran workers must use considerable amounts of their own time to address unreliable and unhealthy access to water, and that time is often uncompensated. Time and health are intimately connected, and workers agree that these water issues have a deleterious effect on their ability to sustain and reproduce themselves. The connection between physical and mental health was underscored when I spoke with Jorge from the *Central Autónoma de Trabajadores Salvadoreños* (Autonomous Centre for Salvadoran Workers, or CATS). He told me that, "This water crisis results in major physical and mental deterioration for workers. It requires us to wake up earlier before work, travel further to collect potable water for our households, and pay more".

Strategies

The labour union strategies I observed are broadly categorised as official and unofficial. They do not neatly follow this binary, however, and there is plenty of overlap between union-designated tactics like collective bargaining and unofficial strategies like work stoppages, strikes and mass marches. I see these

categories as the co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing processes of a working-class socio-ecological justice.

Temporary work stoppages and strikes

One of the most commonly used methods for addressing water-related concerns in the workplace is temporary work stoppages. These can last a shift, roughly 8 to 10 hours, as compared to strikes that can last days, weeks or even months. Notably, workers told me that threats of strikes were often invoked at the bargaining table when *paro de labores* (work stoppages) were not enough to push employers to make concessions.

When unions used temporary work stoppages to make demands about the severity of water issues in the workplace, they often resorted to this tactic after weeks or months of filing complaints to employers. Water quality and infrastructure are major problems in *maquiladoras* (export-oriented factories that mostly engage in textile and apparel production for regional and international companies). Water issues are especially serious in these factories because people are not allowed to bring water from home or keep it near their workstations lest it damage the equipment. The only option for drinking water is therefore the tap at the factory which, according to Doris (the general secretary of the textile workers union, SITRAIMES), meant that, "people were getting sick from drinking the water at the company and were getting stomach and kidney infections". The union was fed up with trying to communicate with the employers, who kept skirting the issue by saying that it was ANDA's responsibility. Doris told me that *maquila* workers already knew that it was ANDA's negligence but were asking for the company to install a new filtration system. It came to the point where the union decided on a work stoppage. As Doris put it,

We told the company to at least add new water filters [they had installed some already that didn't work]. The company wasn't happy with us for bringing this up. But we stopped working one day and told them to put the filters they promised us (...). This is when they finally saw we were serious. They have so much money they can at least do something about a thing we can't live without. It was a long battle, but we managed to get them to change filters and bring in bottled water.

While Doris's example is from a union in the private sector, public sector unions whose 'boss' is the federal government have also used this strategy. It is important to note that strikes and work stoppages are technically illegal for the public sector, and the risk to those carrying out labour actions is especially amplified under the repressive Bukele administration.

In February 2023, I sat down with union representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG). I was interested in meeting with them after their December 2022 work stoppage. The agricultural workers were protesting being owed months of back pay and the fact that MAG was withholding their annual bonus. As I learned, however, the work stoppage went beyond contract agreements, and more broadly addressed the cost-of-living crisis. "The *canasta básica* is expensive, electricity, water is expensive. We need this money to pay our bills", Héctor, one of MAG's members, told me. He went on to say that, "We aren't always confrontational (*no somos de choque*), but when we feel like we have a reason, we have to take action". In that particular case the labour action paid off, with the union securing backpay and bonuses after the work stoppage. As Héctor put it, "How have we won the little that we have achieved? Simple. For workers, about 25% is won by negotiating, but 75% is won in the streets".

In 2022, public sector workers all over San Salvador went on strike to demand backpay, demanding that their precarious material circumstances be addressed (Monterrosa, 2022; Rivera, 2022). Some of these disputes are ongoing and unions have promised to, "suspend work if the government didn't grant them a liveable salary" (Martínez, 2023).

Marches

In 2022 and 2023, public sector unions led several marches, including for Salvadoran Unionist Day (October 2022), the Dignified Pension march (January 2023), and International Workers Day (May 2023). These events attracted thousands of workers into the streets to contest how expensive services (including water) had become, and to highlight threats of privatisation on the well-being of working-class people. Union leaders gave speeches in solidarity with workers in water-related industries. At the Salvadoran Unionist Day rally (Figure 2), one labour leader from a municipal workers federation declared that "Our fellow workers at [the bottling company] *Agua Cristal* are in a work stoppage now because of pay disputes with the company. We need to support our *compañeros* [comrades], we all have the same fight!" Workers had explicit environmental demands; they called for unions to rally for, "*la defensa de la tierra y el derecho al agua*" (the defence of land and the right to water) alongside demands for a liveable wage, decent pensions, and an end to forced overtime and labour violations.

Figure 2. Public sector workers march on Salvadoran Unionist Day.



Source: Author's photo (2022).

Many public and private sector unions gather on May 1 in commemoration of International Workers Day. I arrived that morning and joined the march towards the Plaza Gerardo Barrios in the historic centre of San Salvador. As we started marching, I heard the chants begin: "We celebrate the working class today, and fight for equality, just wages, and a dignified life!"

As the march continued, demands became more specific; they addressed the lack of state spending on critical infrastructure in hospitals and schools, and rejected water privatisation. People brought signs that linked water with ongoing political and economic issues (Figure 3). At the march, the labour movement was joined by other social movements including environmentalists, feminists, veterans, youth movements and politicians from leftist and liberal parties. Environmentalists described the "importance of issues like the right to water, security, food sovereignty and a healthy environment for workers" (Orellana, 2023). The International Workers Day march also fused diverse agendas, though all finding a way to link their specific interests with its impact on working people.

Figure 3. Signs at the May Day march: "Those criminals are the ones privatising our water for 15 years – Corrupt Cyan Bench".



Source: Funes and González (2023).

Note: The Cyan Bench refers to Bukele's political party, New Ideas, whose official colour is cyan. They dominate the Legislative Assembly.

Collective bargaining

Finally, unions utilised negotiating strategies to secure water-related demands. In the following examples, building trades unions used collective bargaining, a process whereby workers negotiate with employers to determine and add measures to their contracts related to pay, working conditions or benefits. I interviewed representatives from a construction workers union (Sindicato de Obreros de la Industria de la Construcción y Conexos de El Salvador, or SOICSCES) and an electric utility workers union (Sindicato de Trabajadores de Servicios Eléctricos, or SIES). Both had successfully negotiated contracts for better pay and benefits and improved working conditions. Both also strongly support the environmentalists' general water law and had rallied rank and file members to join the 2018 water privatisation marches. SIES even made a video for social media with members and their families where they sang "*¡No privatizar! ¡Ha llegado la hora a defender el agua!*" (No to privatisation! The time has come for us to defend our water!) (Sindicato SIES, 2018).

Many workers in the construction industry face constant project delays because of water service interruptions (López Vides, 2022). I interviewed the union's general secretary, Milton, who told me that workers get sick from drinking contaminated water at their worksites. SOICSCES, like the textile workers union discussed above, confronted management about these water issues. The union decided the best course of action would be to fold water-related concerns into their contract negotiations. Milton recalled the experience:

At our construction sites, we've had problems with water. Before, workers would drink water when we were working, and they would get sick. Things are getting a little better now, we've been able to get the Ministry of Health to come and do inspections, to check with the Ministry of Labour to make sure that the water was drinkable. We had to do this because the company won't, they don't care about the health of workers, they just want to make sure the work gets done and to make profits. They don't care about workers getting sick from water. We know because it already happened to us. So, we decided to put workers health into the contracts, and make employers understand that making water healthy for us to consume benefits the company too. It's better to have healthy workers than sick ones.

The union negotiated to have the Ministry of Health inspect water sources at construction sites before workers begin any project, to ensure the health of SOICSCES members. Milton explained that now the

employers must consult with the Ministries of Health and Labour when they request building permits and they must comply with the occupational health norms that are mandated by the construction union.

Milton joined SOICSCES in the late 1990s, during a time when labour was rallying forces to fight health care privatisation. He connects union demands over salaries, labour violations, working conditions, pensions and working hours with broader sociopolitical demands for legislation that improves the lives of working-class people. As Milton put it, "We all know what it feels like when water doesn't come at home, or at work. We are desperate when there is no water. That's why it's a topic for all people".

WATER THROUGH THE GEOGRAPHIES OF WORKING-CLASS LIFE

The legislative water struggle has somewhat dissipated in El Salvador, but the struggle for water justice continues. Demands for improved infrastructure, healthier working conditions, and an end to the cost-of-living crisis are all fundamentally about water justice. These are areas where workers can use the strategies outlined above to leverage their unique economic position in the class structure to exert pressure on employers. If those demands were adopted, workers, but more broadly, working-class Salvadorans, would have more time, energy, and more control over how their lives are spent. They would not have to spend leisure or work time contesting water bills, fixing infrastructure, seeking out other water sources, waking up early to fetch water or fill household vessels, leaving work because of precarious infrastructure, or going to health clinics to get treatment for waterborne illnesses. That time could be spent with family or friends, pursuing creative endeavours, or continuing to organise their workplaces. Salvadoran unions, more than other civil society groups, can deploy these kinds of strategies to demand the economic, social, and environmental justice that would allow for more control over how their time is spent.

Working-class life is marked by precarity, and the inability to access reliable and safe drinking water adds yet another challenge to a lived experience of injustice. What is clear is that powerful Salvadoran economic interests refuse to voluntarily spend money to improve infrastructure, upgrade working conditions, implement changes to bring about a healthier environment, or alleviate the economic anxieties that come from expensive water bills. In response to this indifference, unions have used strikes, work stoppages, collective bargaining and marches to pressure employers to make positive changes. Unions see themselves as the "instruments for working class dignity", and one crucial aspect of a working-class water justice framework is that it applies outside the workplace. The labour movement can use its immense structural leverage to pressure the state into passing legislation that would better the lives of the country's working-class people.

Unfortunately, water injustice persists in El Salvador. I suggest that water justice coalitions should include the perspectives and strategies of organised labour in order to increase the effectiveness of approaches to alleviating these injustices. Campaigns conducted by labour unions do not necessarily frontload water policy, the human right to water or water governance, but Salvadoran unions do not need to be convinced on the merits of the progressive environmental policy that has been championed by water justice movements for decades. Unions overwhelmingly support agendas that keep goods and services in the hands of the public and protect water quality (Artiga-Purcell, 2024). The labour movement in El Salvador is also building linkages with other movements that articulate social relations and water transformations within more-than-human worlds. This burgeoning movement, called the *Movimiento Indígena para la Integración de las Luchas de los Pueblos Ancestrales* (Indigenous Movement for the Inclusion of the Struggles of Ancestral Towns, or MILPA), focuses on extractive practices and land dispossession, particularly regarding Bukele's libertarian projects like Bitcoin City (Gutiérrez, 2025). During a *conversatorio* I attended in November 2022, spokespeople from MILPA addressed material and meaning-making processes in the Salvadoran waterscape. They emphasised that drought was causing the deterioration of the agricultural lands on which rural Salvadorans depend for their livelihoods and asserted that Bukele's construction and tourism projects were further dispossessing them of those lands.

Representatives from public sector unions in San Salvador underscored the importance of showing solidarity with their rural comrades, Indigenous organisations and environmentalists, stating that, "the expansion and impacts of megaprojects on land and water is something that impacts all the working-class. It might be starting here *en el campo* (in rural areas), but it will reach us in the city".⁶

This diverse coalition is further evidence of the utility of approaching water justice struggles from multiple perspectives. It also demonstrates attempts to narrow the rural-urban divide that so often characterises social movement landscapes. A working-class water justice campaign focuses on strategies that allow all working-class people to have more control at, and away from, their workplaces. Organised labour could potentially bargain for pro-environment clauses that focus on the benefits of socio-ecological transformation to the health and safety of working people. Historically, this was spearheaded by unions working in manufacturing, such as autoworkers or electricians (Huber, 2022; Das et al., 2023). More recently, however, teachers unions have bargained for green clauses that mandate installation of water filtration systems, more electric buses, and the installation of solar panels in schools (Limbeck and Bianchi, 2025). Critiques of justice-centred approaches focus on the lack of a theory of power that prevents movements from reversing specific environmental harms (Huber, 2022). In my own justice-centred approach, I argue that water justice and structural power are entwined when the labour movement is leading a class-rooted fight.

In the 1990s, the Salvadoran union movement was at the forefront of the struggle against austerity. It was able to forestall health care privatisation, an achievement that is maintained to this day. This is arguably the most successful social movement action following El Salvador's civil war, one led by labour and that generated public support across El Salvador. Its success is attributed to health care unions' harnessing of their workplace demands to broader social demands, which they accomplished by emphasising how working-class people would be further excluded from public services if health care was privatised. I see this effort as a model for a working-class water justice that can, in a similar way, unite people across the country. Building a working-class water justice movement that is led by unions is a broader project that is aimed at protecting and expanding social goods for the Salvadoran population. A crucial component of it is the empowerment of the working-class.

Demands for water justice between environmentalists and organised labour do overlap. These demands also resonate with broader working-class concerns related to the water crisis such as economic anxiety, precarity and the endless quest for more time. Arguably, we also see intersections with the strategies deployed for building solidarity between labour and environmentalists, especially when they involve lobbying or marches. These movements are distinguished by the constituencies they represent and by how those constituencies dictate the kind of activism that is undertaken. Environmental movements are often connected to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that depend on grant or foundation funding and privilege the participation of consumers or broadly defined 'communities' (Fong and Naschek, 2021). Labour unions, on the other hand, envision causal pathways for social change that involve contentious actions, and whose actions are determined by dues-paying and voting members of a union or labour federation. In other words, the main democratic agent of environmentalism for labour unions is the worker rather than the broadly defined community or consumer (Huber, 2025). Despite these distinctions, both movements necessitate knowledge, awareness, and education as preconditions for action, and both work to strengthen solidarity, and to establish more control over one's own free time.

Free time is valuable, and the fight to control our time remains an important struggle for the working class more broadly. Today, we find that our time is continually squeezed, with less and less of it available

⁶ This data comes from a November 2022 event in the eastern province of San Miguel called *Conversatorio Perspectivas de los Territorios de Vida de El Salvador* (Conversations and Perspectives on the Territories of Life of El Salvador). This event was organised by the National Union for the Defence of the Working Class (UNT) labour federation and by MILPA. (Spanish to English translations are by author).

to enjoy leisurely time away from the workplace. The pressure on free time is also felt at home; this is especially the case in relation to the water crisis where precarities are exacerbated by unreliable access to increasingly expensive water. Because of its value, time is fundamentally political and can constitute a political demand that social movements fight to protect. Water justice is a rallying cry for Salvadorans because they can recall specific experiences where they have spent too much time confronting a water crisis that had damaging effects on their health and safety. These circumstances are avoidable, and the labour movement uses union strategies for water justice, demanding robust investment in Salvadoran public goods and services that allow for more free time. These approaches should thus be considered alongside those presented by environmentalists. Because a working-class water justice framework is an effort to defend the public provision of water, I argue that it is also the catalyst for transforming, strengthening, and extending funding for public institutions. In this way, the labour movement is an imperative agent of radical democratic reform that can address the severity of the Salvadoran water crisis. As my interviewees put it, "everyone is vulnerable to the water crisis, so the best way to protect water is to improve public services".

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have observed the role of the Salvadoran labour movement in the ongoing fight for water justice. While labour unions did not play a leading role in the legislative water struggle, they have nonetheless engaged in battles for water justice as an organised movement. This lack of direct legislative participation could be related to the jargon-laden abstractions that are built into legal battles. Labour unions do support an inclusive water law for Salvadorans, though they do not necessarily articulate the governance process as their main avenue for struggle. Even so, union workers are unwavering in their position that secure, safe and affordable access to water is key to a 'just and dignified life'. In the paper, I examined the historical and contemporary roles of the labour movement in fights against austerity and privatisation, demonstrating that unions wield significant levers of power in protecting public goods and services for Salvadorans. Because water injustices flow through spheres of production and social reproduction, working-class water justice demands that the state invest in public infrastructure to remedy chronic water shortages, illnesses from contaminated drinking water, and excessive and unjust charges. Unions have folded these demands into the strategies they have deployed to pressure employers for provisions at work, including improved work environments that, in turn, lead to better conditions at home.

Salvadoran labour unions are facing an authoritarian regime that uses its power to repress dissenting voices, even when workers demand what is owed to them. The current moment is dangerous for Salvadoran social movements because any protest, march or form of demonstration is now subject to the suspicion of gang affiliation under President Bukele's regime of exception. Workers told me about direct threats and harassment they had received in their homes as intimidation tactics after they spoke out against labour abuse or lack of pay. Under Bukele, the cost of living has risen, basic goods are more expensive, funding for public services is being slashed, and workers livelihoods are threatened. Water is one expression of this deterioration, whether through unsafe working conditions or skyrocketing costs. Despite the current administration boasting newly improved and streamlined water services, particularly following the codification of the Law of Water Resources, provision and distribution of potable water remains unorganised, inefficient and expensive. Bukele's rhetoric depicts an illusion of control that obfuscates an austerity project which continues to harm workers, cause further deterioration of public institutions, and obscure the process to secure public goods. At this current juncture, workers and their unions are among the strongest social forces fighting to defend public services, demand better living standards, and hold the state accountable to the Salvadoran people for delivering a working-class water justice.

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