

## YOUTH ACTIVISM

**D**ESPITE A VIGOROUS nationwide search and a handful of traffic-snarling protests, Edward Francisco Contreras is still missing. The 21-year-old student activist disappeared February 7, and his father and friends say they have made little headway in finding him.

According to Contreras's fellow activists, few of whom wanted their real or full names published, agents from the homicide division of the national police stopped a bus Contreras was riding outside the San Salvador suburb of Santa Tecla and arrested him without explanation. They say the officers at the Ateos police station originally said he had been detained there, but since then no police agency will acknowledge that Contreras was ever in its custody.

"After that, we have no other information," says Carlos of the Popular Youth Bloc (BPJ in Spanish), of which Contreras was a member. "We have to find out if they were really police officers. We know that death squads exist [again] and that they are already functioning."

Contreras's *compañeros* in the BPJ decry his disappearance as an example of growing repression against the student movement. Today's Salvadoran university activists—inheritors of the militant organizations born in the 1970s—have focused on campus-based issues like university funding and equitable admission policies, but most groups also maintain close ties to El Salvador's vibrant social movements. They are as likely to march against increased electricity rates as they are to protest tuition hikes.

A week after Contreras went missing, the Brigade of Revolutionary Students and the BPJ cordoned traffic for blocks around the National University. Hundreds of students



## Salvadoran Students Confront Growing Repression

participated in the five-hour action demanding Contreras's release, clogging morning rush-hour traffic and drawing significant attention to the case.

Following the protest, questions emerged about whether Contreras's disappearance resulted not from his student activism but from his being a key witness in a murder trial. According to a prominent student leader, Contreras worked as a bus fare collector and watched for weeks as a feud developed between dueling drivers. Later, a driver with whom Contreras worked was shot dead, and Contreras was set to testify in court.

On March 9, the left-leaning daily *Diario Co-Latino* published an interview with an anonymous BPJ member who said organized crime could be behind Contreras's disappearance, apparently referring to the bus driver feud.

Transit company bosses wield enormous power in El Salvador, and many speculate that they are behind a large portion of the country's drug-trafficking business. Could Contreras be a victim of a hit to prevent his testimony in court and to stop a transit boss from falling? If so, he has become yet another statistic in this nation, where an average 12 people die violently every day. Human rights defenders estimate that 5% of mur-

ders in El Salvador are contract killings.

Whatever the facts surrounding Contreras's mysterious "arrest," his disappearance has made El Salvador's student movement realize that no one is safe and that a return to the political repression that university organizations experienced during the 1980s may not be far away. After a January march against El Salvador's recently approved Special Law

Against Acts of Terrorism—which many think could open the door to further repression—10 BPJ members were tracked down by police and arrested. All were released days later without charge.

Last month, the president of the UN Working Group on Forced Disappearances, Santiago Corcuera, visited El Salvador and stated flatly that "forced disappearances are a continued and permanent occurrence." El Salvador's human rights ombuds-woman, Beatrice de Carrillo, and the Legal Assistance Office of the Archbishop of San Salvador have, in separate reports, echoed claims that "extermination groups" tied to "people with power" are operating in the country. President Tony Saca and Public Security Director Roberto Ávila have largely ignored these claims.

Back on campus, Oswaldo Nataren of the Roque Dalton University Front says he fears disappearance but contemplates his hopes for El Salvador's student movement. "We must overcome our differences and build unity among students," he says. "If not, the government will take advantage of our divisions."

—Jason Wallach

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