

Nicaragua: An Eyewitness Account

by Timothy Austin and Laura Barnes

Introduction

We want to share with our friends some of our impressions from our recent trip to Nicaragua. While our trip was far too short for our taste, and our ability to gather information limited by time, we want to pass on what we know to anyone who is trying to decide what to think about Nicaragua. What we learned is very much at odds with the picture being painted by the US press and the Reagan administration.

We were part of a work team of 35 people traveling to Nicaragua as an act of solidarity to learn about the changes that are taking place there and to do voluntary labor in the cotton harvest. Sixteen of us went from Boston, and the rest were from a few cities in upstate New York. Most of us have been activists in the solidarity movement on behalf of the Central American people. Six Latino people were part of our group; there were a few more men than women.

Our itinerary had us traveling down via Newark-Miami-San Jose, Costa Rica-Managua, which was somewhat arduous. Our hosts for the trip were the Association of Rural Workers (ATC), the union of the Nicaraguan farm laborers, and one of the largest and best organized groups in the country. Our first 4 days were spent in Managua, meeting with everyone under the sun from sunrise to bedtime; it was exhausting, but fascinating, and quite an honor, given who we met with. Our meetings included the Ministries of Education and Health, the Sandinista-led trade union (CST), the ATC national leadership, the women's organization (AMNLAE), the neighborhood-based Sandinista Defense Committees, and more. From Managua we then traveled to the province of Leon and the "finca" on which we were to work. We spent 7 days in the countryside, 5 of them working. We lived and worked under basically the same conditions as the campesinos on the finca, which was a state-owned and operated farm expropriated after the victory along with all the property of Somoza and

his National Guard. We returned to Managua for our last three days and more meetings. Without getting bogged down in too many details, we can try to give some impressions from our experiences.

From Managua to the Countryside

The first and most striking impression of Managua is the physical appearance of the city itself, which is only indirectly related to the revolutionary victory. We got a tour of the city our first day there. We went by bus into the city (we were staying about 13 km outside) and were let off in a wide open grassy plain, broken only by an occasional gutted building. "This is downtown Managua." The 1972 earthquake had completely leveled downtown Managua. It was devastating to see. Millions of dollars of relief funds to aid the homeless and rebuild the city had been embezzled by Somoza and used to enrich his businesses. He rebuilt none of downtown; he didn't even have the beautiful old cathedral swept out, much less restored. And the US Marines had to be brought in to prevent an immediate uprising as a result of the pillaging and looting by the National Guard. This was all instrumental in the revolutionary victory, as it served to not only highlight the barbarity of the regime in the eyes of the people of the city, but it also turned the Nicaraguan business community against Somoza, when businessmen watched him channel relief funds into projects which strengthened his hold over the economy and weakened theirs.

We saw similar devastation in the cities of Leon and Masaya, but for different reasons. Both cities were the scenes of some of the hardest fought battles during the insurrection. The walls of practically all the buildings were pocked with bullet holes, and many buildings were completely destroyed when Somoza ordered Leon bombed by the National Guard. Nearly everyone we met there was a veteran of the war in one way or another. Most had lost at least one family member in the fighting. This wasn't only true in these cities. The vast majority of the people participated in the insurrection, especially the youth, who were on the barricades by the age of 12, and

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leading military operations at the age of 19. As a result, the scars of the war run very deep for most of the Nicaraguan people.

The youthfulness of the people and their leaders was very hard to get used to. The Nicaraguan population is extremely young; median age is 15, with 70% under 24 years old. But it was hard to get used to talking with people who were younger than ourselves and were heads of 50,000 member unions and had been fighting Somoza since they were 13. Very humbling, to say the least.

The countryside was a real education. Conditions are very difficult for the campesinos, and they were of course much more difficult for the gringos to adjust to. Work is seasonal, so workers move with the harvests. The first work center we went to consisted of wooden barracks, one family to a room; wooden latrines with no running water; a common kitchen with a brick wood stove and dirt floor; no electricity, and hand-pulled well water; a diet of rice, beans and corn tortillas morning, noon and night. Children seemed very malnourished, and sanitary conditions seemed very unhealthful. The work itself was equally hard. Half the cotton in Leon is picked by machine (brand new, bright green, two-story John Deere harvesters from Mexico), and the rest by hand. The work is heavy, hot, tiring, and we weren't even working a full day and were picking about a third of what the Nicas were picking.

This was all rather shocking to us. As one friend put it, it wasn't exactly the picture you'd send home with the caption "Isn't socialism great?" But we quickly learned from the campesinos that our frame of reference was totally unrealistic. The dark over-crowded barracks? The makeshift latrines? The unsanitary cooking facilities? All were new. The kitchen used to be unenclosed; people slept under trees; and there were no latrines. No one liked the diet, but at least now there was enough. And the working conditions had improved immensely: from wages, to pregnancy and disability benefits, to vacations.

And these measures are very popular. To emphasize the significance of having vacations now, one campesino told us, "We campesinos have been waiting for a vacation for 30 years!"

Popular Support

Conditions have indeed improved. Organization is now encouraged instead of repressed, and workers play an active role in administering the state farms. They really felt they were being listened to and taken seriously. They were now free from the repression of the National Guard, who would terrorize the population at the slightest provocation, or even completely arbitrarily. At the Leon Guard headquarters they used to amuse themselves by kidnapping a couple of women and gang raping them before killing them to eliminate witnesses: "disappeared." People couldn't say enough nice things about the Sandinista police. Health care, though not readily available as yet in the countryside due to bad roads and shortages of funds, is now free and is a right of the people. Schools, unheard of in the countryside before, are now everywhere and are free. Perhaps the most far reaching and popular of the government initiatives was the literacy campaign. Faced with a population half illiterate, the government mobilized university and high school students to voluntarily go into the countryside to teach basic reading, writing and arithmetic to the people. In a year the illiteracy rate was lowered from 52% to 12%. Nearly everyone we talked to in the countryside had been touched by the campaign, from young workers, to mothers of five, to old men of 65 years. It was very moving to hear their stories.

Is there popular support for the current government? It is amazing how many different opinions you can get about what's going on. We heard many complaints about prices, about shortages, about all sorts of things. I think what we were witnessing in some ways was a people experiencing freedom of expression for the first time. They were as aware of that as we were, remembering that under the Guard, to express a political opinion was to risk death. We reached two conclusions about the question of popular support. First, that despite the many and varied criticisms we heard, the vast majority of the people were prepared to take up arms to defend their government. As one campesino put it, "We struggled for 20 years to be free. We're free now, and we'll die free." The second is that despite that basic level of support, the revolution has yet to achieve the kind of popular participation necessary to sustain itself. It is to the government's credit that that is the goal: popular participation. And we were left with little doubt that more and more of the people who we saw taking a passive, wait-and-see attitude would become more actively involved in shaping the society. Perhaps we should emphasize a third point as well. Neither supporters nor critics of the Sandinistas can understand Reagan's policies of economic sanctions: canceling and vetoing loans, threatening blockades, etc. Even the private businessmen are opposed, because they are directly harmed by the economic sanctions, rather than strengthened, which Reagan professes as his goal. It is

clear from his actions that strengthening Nicaragua's private sector is *not* his goal; destruction of the Nicaraguan economy and the resulting political destabilization *is*.

A People United Against Counter-Revolution and US Intervention

Perhaps the thing that keeps the Nicaraguan people most unified is the active threat posed by right wing counter-revolutionaries. Just in the course of the time we were in Managua three major events took place. First, we heard about a confrontation between pro-Sandinista youth and followers of the right wing businessmen's association. Rocks were thrown, apparently started by the youth, whose class hatred runs very deep, and who were upset by anti-Sandinista, pro-US rhetoric being spouted by the speakers. Sandinista police kept it from becoming a serious battle.

Second, an international conspiracy was uncovered involving the embassies of Argentina, El Salvador, Honduras, Venezuela, and the US, and implicating the CIA. The targets of the plot had been the two major industrial establishments in the country, a cement factory and an oil refinery. The plot was to dynamite them, thus paralysing the construction industry, cutting fuel supplies, and conveniently poisoning the water supply of the city of Managua. All was very well documented, and one of the plotters had confessed. The plot had been uncovered by the state security forces with the help of the workplace defense committees at the two establishments.

The third is perhaps the most topical, as it deals with Haig's favorite defender of the free press, *La Prensa*. The paper had failed to condemn editorially the counter-revolutionary conspiracy we just outlined. A group of demonstrators, maybe 400 in all, marched to *La Prensa* demanding a statement of condemnation. On TV we later watched as *La Prensa's* security forces tried to disperse the demonstrators with their water cannon. Meeting with failure, a security guard pulled out his pistol and shot into the crowd, seriously injuring one man. This was an especially traumatic event to the Nicaraguans, because it was the first time anyone had fired into a demonstration since the overthrow of Somoza, and most people had thought those days were gone for good. The arrival of the Sandinista police prevented the lynching of the people inside *La Prensa*.

After the event, the paper closed itself voluntarily for two days, and then resumed publishing. We were all left with one conclusion: the right-wing and the CIA are going to provoke the closing of *La Prensa* if they have to kill someone to do it. This would provide the excuse the US needs to justify its attacks on the 'totalitarian' Sandinistas. The government has not responded to the provocation; it allows *La Prensa* to publish.

There would not be any hue and cry from the workers and campesinos if the government did shut them down; a majority may well support that, given the paper's counter-revolutionary positions. "Freedom of the press" is pretty clearly no longer the issue in the case of *La Prensa*. (More on this later.)

Also worthy of note here are the US funded counter-revolutionary bands that roam the Honduran border. They pose no real military threat because they have no base of popular support. But they are killing people at an increasing rate, and are being sought by the Army. Most are former National Guardsmen who are essentially mercenaries seeking to regain their privileges.

The reason we dwell on counter-revolutionary activity in Nicaragua and its international connections is to explain the mentality we found there. The Nicaraguans fully expect an invasion, spearheaded and organized by the US. We can't say they are paranoid, given the track record of the US in Latin America (Guatemala '56; Cuba '61; Dominican Republic '65; Chile '73); and given Haig's refusal to rule out such an action. So the government of Nicaragua is seriously preparing their defenses. While much hay has been made by Reagan out of the Nicaraguans trying to modernize their air force, the principal thrust of their military mobilization is the popular militias. These consist of voluntary contingents of workers and campesinos, trained and armed by the government in readiness for invasion. They are not part of the standing army, and they now only perform the task of patrolling the streets at night to spot counter-revolutionary activity. The administration claims Nicaragua has the largest army in Central America—but they are including in their count the citizen militia, which is a purely defensive force, not suitable for aggression. The actual standing army of Nicaragua is estimated to be in the area of 25,000. By comparison, the standing army of Guatemala has approximately 35,000 members.

Our conclusion here is worth emphasizing. The Nicaraguans have no intentions of invading any other country. The threats to their sovereignty are real: while we were in Managua two US destroyers were cruising off the Honduran coast, minutes from the Nicaraguan coast. The Nicaraguan people and the Nicaraguan government remember the Bay of Pigs, and will be ready for theirs. We can hardly blame them for their vigilance.

Despite all this, we were very well received by the Nicaraguans we met. There is certainly strong anti-Yanqui feeling, but most people we met didn't seem to have a hard time seeing the difference between the US government and the US people, especially confronted with a solidarity group from the US. They were appalled at US support of counter-revolutionary training camps in Florida; one guy asked us why we weren't attacking the camps ourselves. And interestingly, most people seemed to genuinely want relations with the US, and wanted to avoid the Cuban situation of being totally cut off from the US and dependent on the Soviet Union. Government officials and people we talked to left no room for doubt, however, that Nicaragua would not hesitate to go straight to the Soviets if the US put the economic screws to them.

The Miskitu Indians

Our trip took us only to the provinces of Leon and Managua on the Pacific Coast. By all accounts, Nicaragua can be seen realistically as two distinct territories, the developed Pacific Coast, and the

undeveloped and sparsely-populated Atlantic Coast, whose population includes English-speaking black people to the south around the city of Bluefields, and indigenous peoples of three Indian tribes to the north along the Honduran border. About 9% of the population of Nicaragua live in the Atlantic Coast provinces. Our own experiences gave us no exposure to the Atlantic Coast region; but the recent charges by the Reagan administration of gross human rights abuses in this area call for some response here.

Washington charges that the Sandinistas are torturing, killing, imprisoning, and forcibly relocating members of the Miskitu Indian tribe in order to suppress dissent in the region. Aside from the sheer hypocrisy of Reagan's new-found and selectively-applied concern for Native American people, the White House campaign has consistently run afoul of that old bugaboo, the truth. A triumphant Haig unveiled photos which purported to be of Miskitus being burned by the Sandinistas, only to learn that the photo was an old one of Red Cross public health volunteers burning bodies of victims of Somoza's tyranny. UN Ambassador Kirkpatrick charged the FSLN with imprisoning 250,000 Miskitus; which would be a neat trick, since there are only 70,000 Miskitus in the entire country.

We would like to share some facts about the situation.

There *is* dissent among the Miskitu, deriving in large part from their historical isolation from the rest of the country under Somoza, and their resulting lack of participation in the uprising against Somoza.

Ten thousand Miskitus (estimates on the number vary) have been evacuated from the area near the Honduran border to new communities about 50 miles south. The evacuation was forced in that it was a decision of the government, based on the military situation in the area. The purpose was *not* suppression of dissent, but protection of the population from the murderous incursions of Somocista bands based in Honduras, and supported by CIA covert-action funds. These attacks have already taken the lives of over a hundred Miskitu civilians, and two hundred Sandinista soldiers in the last six months. A Miskitu Bishop in the Moravian Church in the area agreed that the military situation justified the evacuation.

The evacuation was, by all accounts we know of (discounting the State Department) humanely carried out; no massacres, no torture. Crops, houses, and most livestock *were* destroyed; this was deemed necessary to prevent the counter-revolutionary bands from establishing a base camp in the area.

The US government is deeply involved in the destabilization of the area. The goal of this activity is the establishment of a counter-revolutionary provisional government on Nicaraguan soil which can then seek international recognition and foreign aid (which will certainly be immediately forthcoming from our government). The destructive potential of this plan cannot be overstated; it poses a particular danger given their ability to exploit the legitimate desires of the Miskitu people for some form of administrative autonomy from the central government of Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas, though well-intentioned, have made serious mistakes in their dealings with the indigenous

peoples. Some of these mistakes they have admitted and some they haven't. In general, our opinion is that they have failed to fully appreciate and respect the cultural integrity of the native people, and have instead attempted to analyze the situation strictly along class lines (i.e., when the material inequality between the lifestyle of the Miskitus and that of the rest of the population has disappeared, the material basis for racism will have disappeared). Such an 'integrationist' approach has alienated many people in these communities, justifying their deep-seated mistrust of the 'Ladinos' from the Pacific Coast.

One example is illustrative of both the good intentions of the FSLN and their insufficient sensitivity to cultural differences. The literacy campaign was successfully conducted on the Atlantic Coast, the native peoples being taught in their native languages (no small achievement since one language had never before been written). While this definitely won some friends for the Sandinistas, this was somewhat mitigated by their initial attempt, against the advice of Miskitu leaders, to conduct the campaign in Spanish. That attempt was met with firm resistance from the indigenous peoples, reinforcing their suspicions and making the later successful campaign seem more of a victory over the Sandinistas than *for* the Sandinistas.

The FSLN did learn from their mistaken first attempt; that bodes well for the eventual resolution of the tensions in the area. But it is clear that problems will persist as long as the FSLN pursues an integrationist approach rather than balancing the real need for national unity with the real desires of the indigenous peoples for some form of administrative autonomy and cultural integrity.

Unfortunately, the military situation seems to preclude any such arrangement for the time being. Indeed, it would be irresponsible to place the primary blame for the problems on the Atlantic coast on the Sandinistas, given the Reagan administration's manipulative attempts to use the Miskitu people to destabilize and overthrow the Sandinistas. It is this continuing military threat that currently prevents the peaceful reconciliation between the Sandinistas and the indigenous peoples. The tense situation on the Atlantic coast poses more clearly than ever what the role of concerned North Americans should be—to prevent the US government from using these contradictions to overthrow the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

The Cuban Presence and the El Salvador "Connection"

What about the Cuban presence? There are a lot of Cubans in Nicaragua, and they are spread out all over the country. What are they doing there? To start with, there are 2000 grade school teachers working there at no expense to the Nicaraguan government. We kept *almost* meeting some of them, but they kept being so damn revolutionary. A Cuban woman teaches at the finca we worked on, but she was away on vacation picking cotton with a Cuban brigade of volunteer workers. We thought we might get to meet the whole brigade, but instead of



resting on Sunday like ourselves and the Nicas, they were out picking cotton. We did meet two Cuban "advisers" at the finca later. They were agronomists there to help introduce a higher yield strain of bean into the Nica diet. The Cubans have also sent extensive medical personnel, though we didn't hear too much about them. The Nicaraguan's reaction to the Cubans was apparently guarded at first. Some said they had heard about communists, and worried about what they would be like. But their fears apparently were groundless; we found the people we met to be very thankful for their help and pleased with the Cubans themselves. There had never been a teacher for the children of this farm before, and their parents were delighted to have one. One group member, trying to elicit some anti-Cuban feelings, asked a campesino if the Cubans were in any way odd. He replied, "Yes, they mix their beans and rice together before they eat them."

Now, we *did* meet some Soviets! In one of the more bizarre episodes of the trip, we got included at the last minute in a cultural exchange between the Sandinista youth group and KOMSOMOL, the Soviet youth group who were touring Central America. To begin with, the Soviet "youth" were in their thirties, which must have been especially incomprehensible to the young Nicas. And then the cultural presentations were such a contrast. The Soviets with their professional, precise, beautifully costumed dancers; and the Nicas with their little homegrown skits and traditional folk dances by frightened little girls in too-big dresses. It was all very spirited, the big hit being a medley of Nicaraguan revolutionary music done by a Soviet band in both Spanish and Russian. The Nicas loved it. And it was an important event, too, all kidding aside. The Nicaraguans have been prevented from having relations with the Soviet people for 50 years. They feel that one of the things they won with their revolution was the right to relate to any people they choose. What we saw was an affirmation of that right.

So are the Nicaraguans running guns to El Salvador? We realize it's not much of an answer, but we didn't see any. Seriously, who knows? It seems very unlikely, given the tension and the constant provocation on the Honduran border and the close patrolling of the Gulf of Fonseca by the Salvadorean army. It was certainly obvious that there was no shortage of moral support for the Salvadorean guerrillas in Nicaragua. The Nicas see the insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala as repetitions of their own struggle against oppression, and support it on that basis. In addition, they realize that their fate is tied up with the fate of the region; that no US invasion of El Salvador would stop in El Salvador. As for gun

running, the line we got was: "The best assistance Nicaraguans can give to our brothers and sisters in El Salvador is a strong Nicaragua." The argument is a good one. And so far, from the discredited White Paper to the 'smoking Sandinista' incident, the State Department has failed to provide proof that Nicaragua is offering more than moral support.

Defense of Basic Freedoms

No discussion of our trip would be complete if we failed to address the charges emanating from the White House about the 'totalitarian' nature of the Nicaraguan regime. The question is clearly a loaded one. But we can avoid long arguments about the definition of the term 'totalitarian', or its more acceptable companion 'authoritarian', by talking instead about freedom and oppression. And we have a responsibility as US citizens to address this issue with US foreign policy in mind, for this is why the region is of such keen interest to us here. So we'd like to discuss this question of freedom and oppression by asking the following question: Which government deserves the support of the US people and the US government, that of Nicaragua or that of El Salvador? This seems to us the only responsible way to pose the question, given the huge military and economic aid going to the Salvadorean junta, and by contrast the economic aggression and covert actions being aimed at the Sandinista-led government in Nicaragua.

Freedom of speech is something that immediately pops to mind in any such discussion. Suffice it to say that in El Salvador there is no such thing, the assassination of an archbishop who opposed the junta being only the most widely known outrage. The penalty for opposition is death; in fact, the penalty for just being a *likely* opponent (a young man) is often death.

As for Nicaragua, the same used to be true in the days of Somoza, but the people now seemed genuinely proud of the freedom of expression they had won in the war. Critics of the government spoke with us openly, apparently without fear of recrimination. And the government has gained a reputation for listening to criticisms and complaints. Opposition parties, even openly counter-revolutionary ones, operate legally, and are even guaranteed a seat on the Council of State, the national governing body. We saw their billboards by the highway, and read about their meetings in the newspapers. The Sandinistas have even initiated the "National Forum" where they meet with opposition parties to discuss their differences. It was constantly impressed on us that dialog, not confrontation, is their policy. This can only be contrasted with the steadfast refusal by the Salvadorean junta and the US State Department to respond to the guerillas' invitations to negotiate an end to the current war.

As for the issue of freedom of the press, let's again frame our discussion by pointing out the situation in El Salvador. There is no opposition press. The only opposition media at all is the guerillas' clandestine "Radio Venceremos" which the Salvadorean army has been trying to destroy for a year now. To publish

criticism of the Salvadorean government is even more fatal than to speak it.

As we've said before, much has been made of the government's shutting down of *La Prensa* for two or three days at a time last year. The reason for these forced closures was the paper's violation of a law that forbids the publication of lies about the government. You may criticize such a law if you wish, but it is important to remember that Nicaragua sees itself as being at war with counter-revolution—with armed bands on the Honduran border—and with the entire US intelligence apparatus. These threats are real, and Haig will not deny that the CIA is involved.

La Prensa is the mouthpiece of the counter-revolution, and there is evidence that points to the CIA as the editorial board of the paper. *La Prensa's* behavior closely parallels that of *El Mercurio*, the right-wing newspaper in Chile, which was revealed in Senate hearings to have been a key tool in the CIA's successful destabilization plan there.

But although much ado has been made about the two closings of *La Prensa*, in fact the Sandinistas have overall taken the tack of restricting the paper's ability to distort and manipulate news without closing it. For example, the day we arrived, the government passed a law forbidding the reporting of miracles that hadn't been 'certified' as actual miracles by the church. This was in response to the paper's stories about sightings of the Virgin Mary, come to tell the Nicaraguans (a very religious people) that their government was leading them to damnation. The government chose to pass such a ridiculous law rather than sanction the paper. Our opinion is that given the level of counter-revolutionary activity in the country, and its international connections, the government is being more than tolerant with *La Prensa*.

It is interesting to note in this connection that although there is an appeal procedure available to a paper that has been closed, *La Prensa* has never chosen to exercise their legal right to appeal. This makes it clear that the paper's goal is not a free press, but rather is to provoke the Sandinistas into closing them, thus creating an international incident. It is for these reasons that we say the freedom of the press is no longer the issue in the case of *La Prensa*; the issue is counter-revolution.

But again, to put the issue in context, there are other non-government controlled media outlets, some supportive of the government, some not. And they are free to function and criticize, as long as they don't violate the law. No such opposition is allowed to function in El Salvador today.

What about freedom of assembly? In El Salvador, to meet is to die. Every union hall has been bombed at least once, with many union leaders being assassinated. Perhaps the most telling example is that of the so-called agrarian reform. In one town, the army told the campesinos to form a cooperative and elect some leaders, only to come back the next day to take the newly elected leaders off to be shot.

Nicaragua is a beehive of organization. People are being urged to form unions, neighborhood committees and self-governing cooperatives. In contrast to the agrarian reform in El Salvador, we witnessed the

handing over of land titles to peasant cooperatives by the government in a very moving ceremony. Even the right meets freely, and as we saw in two cases described earlier, they receive protection from the Sandinista police when attacked. In El Salvador, it is the police who are doing the attacking.

Religious Freedom and Free Elections

Freedom of religion? One archbishop and four US nuns later, we can tell what kind of freedom of religion exists in El Salvador. Security forces there even opened fire on the archbishop's funeral procession.

By contrast, religion seemed to be quite freely practiced in Nicaragua, even by non-Catholics. Certainly the most stereotype-shattering story we heard during our trip was from a dynamic 71-year-old woman who had traveled to Cuba recently as part of a cultural exchange between the Cuban and Nicaraguan Baptist churches! Priests participate in the government: Father Ernesto Cardenal is the Minister of Culture, and Maryknoll priest Father Miguel D'Escoto is the Foreign Minister. Religion is a much-discussed subject, as the dispute within the Church rages over how actively involved in (or opposed to) the revolutionary process the Church should become. We heard of no instances of religious persecution, even from harsh critics of the government. Again, a sharp contrast to the situation in El Salvador, where you can be as religious as you want, as long as you interpret the gospel the "right" way.

What about due process and the justice system? In El Salvador (I know you're tired of hearing it, but imagine living it!) justice is by death squad, trials are unheard of. Over a year later they still haven't brought anyone to trial for the murder of the nuns, much less the 30,000 civilians killed in the last two years.

We really didn't learn much one way or the other about the justice system in Nicaragua. The government is currently rewriting the penal code. And we were told by many different people of the lenient (some thought too lenient) treatment given ex-National Guardsmen after the victory. In one humorous story, the Sandinista leadership called a press conference to respond to charges by the White House that they had summarily executed a certain National Guard commander. They brought him out in front of the cameras and asked him, "Have we executed you?" Their slogan is "Intractable in battle, generous in victory." We have yet to see any evidence to indicate otherwise.

What about the issue of free elections? In El Salvador, elections were held, but the condition for the left's participation was that they lay down their arms. The last time the left leadership entered El Salvador peacefully on the invitation of the government, they were kidnapped by the army in broad daylight, in front of the press, and their mutilated bodies were found the next morning. That's the kind of mistake you only make once.

Elections are scheduled for 1985 in Nicaragua. When the 'revolutionary junta' took power in the United States in 1776, they held no elections for seven years. The Nicaraguans will beat our record by a year, according to their schedule. The position of the government is that the

people made their choice of leadership when they took up arms with the FSLN to overthrow Somoza. We didn't hear this contradicted by the people we talked with, and we heard no complaints about not having elections. Apparently only the businessmen's association is upset.

But the reason people are usually concerned about elections is as a measure of people's participation in the running of a society. As we see by recent events in Guatemala, "free elections" may mean no such thing. In Nicaragua, though, people's role in active political life is rapidly and radically increasing. Huge numbers of people actively participate in the many mass organizations, from unions to women's organizations. And these organizations in turn play a role in the national government, each having a certain number of seats on the Council of State. Mass demonstrations are a common expression of popular will, and are treated as such by the government. And the goal is to get the people more and more involved, taking more and more responsibility for their own fate. The Nicaraguan government seems to trust the Nicaraguan people and bestows a lot of responsibility on them. By contrast, the Salvadorean government considers the Salvadorean people "subversive" until proven otherwise.

Education and Health Care

Two additional types of freedom have also been won by the Nicaraguan people. The first is freedom from ignorance. The literacy campaign brought the rate of illiteracy down to 12%, and education is now a guaranteed right. We found children in the countryside who were attending schools that had never existed before. One of the reasons elections will not be held until 1985 is that the Sandinistas feel that elections without literacy are not democratic. They are allowing time for their adult education campaigns to take root, to enable the people to participate meaningfully in the process of political debate.

The Sandinistas feel they have everything to gain from an educated populace; Somoza thrived on their ignorance.

Free health care is the other. As yet this remains an unfulfilled promise in many areas of the countryside, as there is a shortage of doctors and the road system doesn't allow easy passage. But it is a promise nonetheless, and one the Nicaraguan people seemed to fully expect to collect on. A more benevolent policy by the US would make a big difference here, as medicine is hard to come by. We were sad to realize that children we met in the countryside might well lose their lives to disease as a result of our government's policies.

Perhaps the one other area of freedom that we should mention as an achievement of the Nicaraguan revolution is the freedom to dispose of the human and material resources of the country in the interests of the people. This is in contrast to the pre-revolutionary state of affairs, in which resources of the country were disposed of in the interest of a small local elite and of US-based multi-national corporations. In most cases, this meant resources draining out of the Nicaraguan economy.

This freedom from exploitation by an international elite in no way means that the economy is one vast public sector. Far from it; over 75% of the land planted with the three main cash crops is in private hands. The mixed economy is more than just rhetoric. What does exist, however, is the recently enacted Emergency Decree which defines the responsibility of the private sector to the people. These responsibilities include obeying labor laws, observing price controls, and most importantly, making productive use of capital; that is, not sabotaging the economy by not planting on your land, or by destroying your machinery. The penalty for such activity is confiscation. But if the rules are followed, profit is guaranteed. Several confiscations have taken place, but the vast majority of private owners seem to be following the rules. The significance of the Emergency Decree is that it attempts to insure that the labor of the Nicaraguan people will be used to benefit the Nicaraguan people, and not just a wealthy elite or the stockholders of some multinational corporation. The Decree had the support of the vast majority of people we talked to, which was especially interesting given that the same

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A problemas sociales soluciones comunales BIENESTAR SOCIAL



A satisfacer las necesidades básicas a través del trabajo productivo y organizado compartiendo los logros sociales

MINISTERIO DE BIENESTAR SOCIAL
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Nicaraguan Government Poster:
Social Problems Require Collective Solutions

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decree outlawed strikes for a period of one year in order to keep production up. We were pleased with the people's understanding of the need for such a measure.

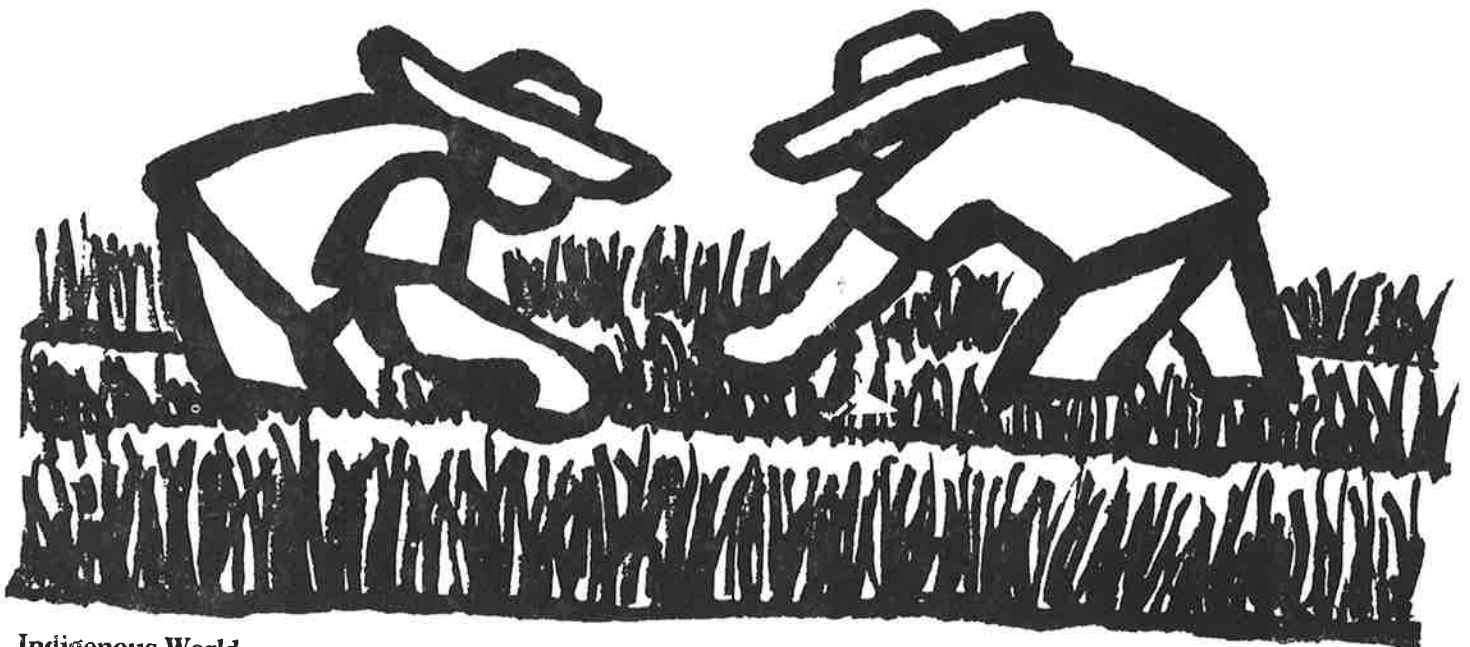
Summing Up

We can now go back to the question we posed earlier as the framework for this discussion of the issue of freedom and oppression: Which government more deserves the support of the US people and the US government, that of Nicaragua or that of El Salvador? It should be obvious by now what our opinion is. It is a national disgrace that our government threatens the Nicaraguan people economically and militarily, while continuing to pump life into a wholly unpopular and genocidal regime in El Salvador with ever increasing infusions of economic and military aid. That is our tax dollars at work. What those tax dollars are being used for in the case of El Salvador is the continuing repression of the Salvadorean people. In the case of Nicaragua, our tax dollars are being used to fund the raids by ex-National Guardsmen on the Nicaraguan people; to fund covert activities aimed at toppling the current government (we recently learned that the CIA is in the process of carrying out a covert operation in Nicaragua that has a military component); and to provide massive arms supplies to the Honduran army as an explicit threat to Nicaragua. And the massive economic and political power of our country is being

used to cut off medical supplies to the Nicaraguan people; to veto international loans to small producers in the countryside (because they support the revolution); to cancel much-needed wheat shipments, depriving the Nicaraguan people of a more balanced diet; and to force the Nicaraguans to divert precious material and human resources to prepare their defenses, at the expense of much-needed social and economic expenditures of direct benefit to the Nicaraguan people. The workers and campesinos of Nicaragua, the people we met and spoke with, are the ones who are hurt by these policies.

And all is justified by the administration as the defense of "democracy." If democracy was really what was being defended and encouraged, the US government would be stopping all aid to the Salvadorean junta, allowing it to topple of its own unpopularity; shutting down all counter-revolutionary training camps of ex-National Guardsmen that operate in this country, and cutting off all support for similar groups along the Honduran border; ceasing covert attempts to topple the truly popular regime in Nicaragua; and opening up this country's abundant financial resources to the Nicaraguan people to allow them to rebuild and develop their country in peace. Defenders of democracy should demand that of our government.

If this has gotten somewhat rhetorical it is only because it is these impressions with which we are left as a result of our trip to Nicaragua and our contact with the Nicaraguan people. That is, on the one hand, the truly inspiring determination of those people to be free and stay that way; and on the other, the embarrassment and outrage that we feel as US citizens for our government's determination to prevent just that.



Indigenous World