

Smash the Contras! Workers to Power!

Nicaragua: An Unfinished Revolution

The Nicaragua/Iran/hostage imbroglio that has engulfed the Reagan government in recent months has provided plenty of material for political columnists and cartoonists. Jimmy Carter's fanatically anti-communist national security man, Zbigniew Brzezinski, commented sourly: "In Western Europe, there is derision at the way America tried to pursue a would-be Machiavelian policy in a manner more reminiscent of Inspector Clouseau." *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Alice Kahn dubbed the affair the "Ayatollah, Ron & Ollie Show," while right-wing commentator William Safire whines that it is probably the "Gipperdaemmerung" for the previously teflon-coated chief North American state terrorist.

Besides showing the Reagan gang's contempt for the niceties of constitutional checks and balances, the scandal has also revealed that there is little support even among the far right for the contra losers. Administration officials now admit that nearly *all* the "private" money raised for the contras has come directly or indirectly from the U.S. government.

What's more, it turns out that the contra chiefs' commitment to free enterprise is not merely ideological. They are fiscal "pragmatists" and have not passed up the opportunity presented by Reagan's largess to branch out into some lucrative sidelines, like laundering money and smuggling drugs. The U.S. General Accounting Office estimates that of the \$27 million Congress allocated to fund the counterrevolution in 1985, "most of it went to private rebel bank accounts in the Cayman Islands or the Bahamas, to private individuals or corporations in the United States, and to the Honduran armed forces" (*New York Times*, 19 June 1986).

This kind of bad publicity fueled Washington's growing disaffection with Reagan's "freedom fighters" and helped prompt the various Congressional investigations into contra wrongdoing. It also contributed to an open split between the State Department's "human face" contras (represented by Arturo Cruz) and the CIA's operational wing headed by Adolfo Calero. But these are only tactical differences. The American bourgeoisie is fundamentally united on the need to roll back the Nicaraguan revolution, a point underlined by the bipartisan support for the \$100 million voted for Reagan's terrorists last summer.

The Contra War: Squeezing Nicaragua's Economy

The U.S. has so far opted for squeezing the fragile Nicaraguan economy while organizing and arming the contra mercenaries. The Sandinistas' 1979 decision to

"turn the other cheek" and free 7,000 members of Anastasio Somoza's murderous praetorian guard proved to be an expensive mistake. These same guardsmen today constitute the backbone of Washington's proxy army. To date they have killed more than 18,000 Nicaraguans and wounded an equivalent number.

In addition to the direct economic damage inflicted by the contras, the cost of fighting the war is an immense drain on the economy. Some 120,000 people have been forced to become refugees in their own country. Twelve percent of the work force serves in the armed forces. To finance the war, which eats up half of all government expenditure, spending on housing, health care and education has been cut to little more than a third of what it was in 1980-82 (*Barricada Internacional*, 28 August 1986). This erosion of social programs in turn undermines the revolution's popular base.

While the war has seriously strained the Nicaraguan economy, on the battlefield the contras have been chewed up by the effective and highly motivated soldiers of the Sandinista popular army. The 15 December 1986 *New York Times* reported: "With their support in Central America at an all-time low, the contras and their Administration backers are now in an 11th-hour scramble to reverse four years of failure....At this point almost no informed analyst gives the rebels much chance of success."

But the contras don't necessarily need a military victory to fulfill their function. Elliott Abrams, Reagan's top Latin American specialist, reiterated the administration's commitment to the contra strategy and asserted, "if this current U.S. policy is maintained, it seems to me the Sandinistas will not survive. Either they will be forced to compromise, or refusing to compromise, the Nicaraguan people will rise up and get rid of them" (*New York Times*, 9 January). The same article reports that "some senior State Department officials...have expressed concern that the Administration is becoming so tightly locked into an anti-Sandinista policy that if the contras falter on the battlefield, pressure may build up within the Administration to commit American forces on their behalf."

Yet there are serious differences within the bourgeoisie over the advisability of direct U.S. intervention. The Center for Defense Information estimates a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua would cost 5,000 U.S. deaths and \$10 billion in the first four years of what would likely be a prolonged and bloody occupation. The more farsighted elements of the ruling class have a sense that the potential risks of such a military adventure, with two-thirds of the American populace opposed from the outset, far outweigh any possible benefits.

In the event that the U.S. does attack, it is the duty of American revolutionists to ensure that the Pentagon's worst fears come true. That means mass mobilizations in the streets, on the campuses and particularly in the black and Hispanic communities. But the most important task will be to agitate in the unions for political strikes against the invasion. The American working class has the social and economic power to do more than just break a few windows—it can stop U.S. intervention in its tracks by interrupting production, communications and transportation.

A Revolution Cannot Serve Two Masters

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) came to power in 1979 with a program of egalitarian, petty-bourgeois nationalism garnished with a sprinkling of Marxist rhetoric. The political parameters of the revolution were recently reiterated by Comandante Humberto Ortega: "This historical stage we are going through in Nicaragua is fundamentally one of national liberation. We cannot address national liberation and social liberation at the same time, it would be too difficult" (*Barricada Internacional*, 31 July 1986).

This is exactly wrong. Nicaragua had its own flag, postage stamps and seat in the United Nations under Somoza. If by "national liberation" Ortega means freedom from neo-colonial dependence on the United States, this cannot be won until the revolution cuts off the imperialist connection at its roots—private ownership of the productive wealth of society. The Nicaraguan capitalists are both the agents and the partners of the American multinationals. To liberate Nicaragua from its historic relationship of neo-colonial dependency, it is necessary to eliminate the "free enterprise" system that consigns the masses of the region to desperate poverty.

The entire history of the Nicaraguan revolution to date underlines this fundamental point. From the very beginning the FSLN's attempts to enlist the support of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie in a struggle for "national liberation" have met with disdain. Since 1979, the capitalists have been decapitalizing as fast as they can, and sending the proceeds to Miami or investing them in the black market.

The FSLN's *Barricada Internacional* (27 March 1986) described the dilemma of the "mixed economy":

"...why not stabilize the economy by keeping profit margins, prices and salaries at a level that would assure reduced consumption and public investment needed to offset the increase in defense spending?

"This cannot be done because 60 percent of Nicaragua's economy is in private hands and its borders are open to commerce with neighbors. Although the government establishes prices and salaries, there are businesses and products that either are not affected by government regulation or simply violate the law...

"These inflated prices make it very attractive for both private and state businesses to siphon off some of their production for sale on the parallel market. As a result, products selling at government controlled prices become more difficult to find and real wages deteriorate....

"Nicaraguan goods are also being exported illegally for sale in neighboring countries. In Costa Rica one can still find medicines and canned goods that were donated to

Nicaragua and quickly disappeared from store shelves; the products were bought up to be sold in neighboring countries at prices ten times higher."

The "magic of the marketplace" has translated into food shortages and rationing. Last summer Vice President Sergio Ramirez Mercado remarked: "We are experiencing the worst moments since the triumph of the Sandinista revolution, a crisis so profound that even supplying foods is very difficult" (*New York Times*, 14 August 1986).

The growth of the black market is disintegrating the proletariat. Thousands of Nicaraguan workers have quit their jobs to become peddlers in the black market because they cannot survive on the wages they earn. Skilled workers who leave the factories to go into business for themselves can make ten times as much as those who stay. The absorption of hundreds of teachers, doctors, engineers, middle-level administrators and other vitally necessary professionals and skilled laborers into the "parallel economy" is putting a tremendous strain on an already overburdened social and economic infrastructure. *NACLA Reports* (April/May 1986) commented, "The black economy...originally seen as a safety valve, has become a gaping hole that threatens to overwhelm the whole economic fabric."

Even many left-liberal Sandinista well-wishers are slowly coming to realize that the Nicaraguan revolution is in deep trouble. Here is how Paul Berman summed up the current situation in the December 1986 issue of *Mother Jones*:

"The war must be won. Therefore the government enforces a military draft. Labor productivity must rise. Therefore the government squeezes the workers. Profitable sectors of the economy must be encouraged. Therefore the government grants as many favors as it can bear to the big capitalist cotton and coffee farmers. A government that enforces a draft, squeezes the workers, favors the capitalists, and does all this in the name of socialism, so that workers and capitalists both feel betrayed—such a government is bound for trouble....

"The quandary, then, is: the government must act, and powerfully. It needs more support than ever. But it does not have more support. It has less. Something must give."

The workers are neither blind nor stupid. They know that the concessions to the bourgeoisie come directly at the expense of their living standards. The success or failure of every revolution ultimately hinges on its ability to "deliver the goods" for the social strata whose interests it represents. But instead of defending the interests of those with a stake in the revolution, the FSLN devotes the lion's share of the country's meager resources to those most hostile to it. The working people of Nicaragua bore the terrible costs of ousting the Somoza gang in the mass insurrection of 1979. They did not do so in order to see a deterioration in the conditions of their lives.

The attempt to discover a "third road" between capitalism and socialism is not working. It cannot work. The current social and economic crisis will be resolved, the only question is: *which class will pay?* This is something the mushy "solidarity" milieu prefers to close its eyes to.

But the true friends of the Nicaraguan revolution are those who are prepared to tell the truth—that the road of Sandinismo is the road to disaster. If the revolution is to survive, it must go forward to expropriate the capitalist parasites and establish a planned economy and a state monopoly of foreign trade.

Class-Collaborationism Internationally: Contadora

The FSLN's appeasement of Nicaragua's large landholders and capitalists is paralleled by its willingness to pursue the chimera of peaceful coexistence with Washington and its Central American clients. Fearing that Reagan's gunboat diplomacy might ignite an explosion which could shatter the rickety capitalist regimes throughout the region, leaders of four Latin American countries (Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Colombia) met on the Panamanian island of Contadora in 1983 to propose a "peace initiative." The "Contadora" accord would obligate the FSLN to "immediately promote national reconciliation," i.e., open negotiations with the contra terrorists. It would also bind Nicaragua to cut off aid to leftist "irregular forces or subversive groups" in the region and to enter into negotiations to reduce its armed forces by as much as half.

In essence, Contadora is an attempt to secure through diplomacy what the contras have been unable to win on the battlefield. Yet the Sandinistas, in a display of defeatist commitment to "political pluralism," endorse the plan as a "bold initiative" and have called it the "only instrument that can and should bring about a rapid and effective settlement" (*Barricada Internacional*, 3 July 1986). At this point though, Contadora is pretty much a dead letter as Reagan refuses to settle for anything less than bloody counterrevolution.

When United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar toured Central America in January to promote "the peace process," Honduran President Jose Azcona Hoyo "said at a news conference that the question of peace in Central America could not be resolved while Nicaragua lacked a democratic form of government" (*New York Times*, 22 January 1987). Hoyo was not just speaking for himself. Honduras, which now gets 15 times as much U.S. military aid as it did in 1980, is a country with the best air force in Central America and the second highest poverty rate in the Western Hemisphere. It is also the main U.S. proxy in the region. Hoyo's masters in Washington want a "rollback," not a deal.

The FSLN's Pro-Capitalist Constitution

The FSLN's determination to reach an accord with the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie is codified in the new constitution approved in November and signed into law by President Daniel Ortega on January 9th. The document reflects all the contradictory class-collaborationist utopianism which is "Sandinismo." The preamble contains a clause lauding those who overthrew Somoza "through their faith in God." It fulsomely condemns "all forms of subordination and exploitation of the human being," and promises "to push forward the material and

spiritual progress of the nation, and to guarantee that the interests and rights of the popular majority prevail." After denouncing all "forms of domination and colonial and imperialist exploitation," the very next section (Article 5) "guarantees the existence of political pluralism, mixed economy, and non-alignment." A mixed economy is defined as "the existence of different forms of property, both public and private, and associative, cooperative, and communal."

By institutionalizing the preservation of capitalist property relations, the Sandinistas declare their intention to consolidate another down-at-the-heels, third-world "revolutionary" nationalist regime like those of Algeria, Angola or Ethiopia. To do so, they will have to decisively turn on the labor movement, the poor peasants and those who represent their interests. Yet, in attacking their popular base, the Sandinistas risk opening the door for a massive counterrevolutionary mobilization. In that event, President Ortega and the rest of the FSLN tops could find that, for them, the "third road" ends up in front of a firing squad.

The PMLN-FO: Left Stalinism in Nicaragua

The left-Stalinist Marxist Leninist Party of Nicaragua (PMLN), which originated as a Maoist split from the FSLN in the early 1970's, was apparently the only party in the National Assembly to vote against the new constitution. The Sandinista boosters who publish the American *Militant* complained that the PMLN "argued that this [the section guaranteeing a mixed economy] 'establishes capitalism' and that by including it in the constitution, the FSLN 'renounced the construction of socialism in Nicaragua'..."

Like the Marxist-Leninist Party of the U.S., with which it maintains fraternal relations, the PMLN broke with the Chinese in the late 1970's and adopted Albania as its "socialist fatherland." Its armed wing fought as an independent force during the 1979 insurrection. Today the organization has its own small union (Frente Obrero—FO) of several thousand workers. In the first year of the revolution, the FSLN suppressed the PMLN, closing its press and arresting dozens of FO cadres for the "crime" of suggesting that the FSLN government should be replaced with one more committed to the defense of the interests of the workers, and less inclined to conciliate the capitalists.

The two members of the PMLN in the Nicaraguan National Assembly have generally acted as a left opposition to the Sandinistas. They have avoided compromising themselves in the fashion of the two pro-Moscow parties (the Nicaraguan Socialist Party and the Nicaraguan Communist Party), both of which signed a joint statement with three bourgeois parties opposing, from the right, the FSLN's "hegemonism" and demanding "real political pluralism [and] respect for the mixed economy" (quoted in *International Viewpoint*, 29 September 1986). The PMLN representatives' wobbles seem to tend in the direction of political support to the petty-bourgeois Sandinista regime. According to *El Socialista*, (newspaper of the ostensibly Trotskyist Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores) last July the PMLN voted

for a law that restored formal ranks to the army and vested the right to make senior appointments in the president. This is tantamount to a vote of confidence in the FSLN.

The Necessity of Workers Councils

The PMLN complains that FO workers are often fired and replaced by members of the Sandinista Workers Confederation (CST). Despite this harassment, the FO is slowly picking up support among workers disenchanted with the FSLN. PMLN cadres have also reportedly undertaken limited, semi-clandestine activity in a few Sandinista unions and have supported the struggles of the odd dissident CST local. But their strategy centers on conquering the masses by gradually building their own small trade-union federation into the hegemonic organization of the class. This is a serious political mistake. Apart from anything else, there is not enough time.

The Nicaraguan working class is divided up among a half dozen union centrals, each of which is aligned with a political party. The CST, with 100,000 members, is by far the largest union. In this situation, the correct application of the united front tactic is critical. It is necessary to coalesce the workers *across* union, party and craft lines to defend proletarian political rights and living standards and to combat capitalist sabotage.

Localized united fronts could lay the foundation for the creation of ongoing workers councils constituted on the basis of direct workplace representation. Such councils (or soviets) would represent what Leon Trotsky called “*the highest form of the united front* under the conditions in which the proletariat enters the epoch of fighting for power” (“What Next?” January 1932). By linking workers regionally and nationally, and branching out to organize parallel formations among the peasants and soldiers, these councils could constitute the broad, authoritative organizational framework necessary to make working class rule possible. In the meantime, they would provide an arena within which revolutionaries could struggle to convince the Sandinistas’ proletarian base to abandon the “third road” and strike out for workers power.

To the best of our knowledge the PMLN/FO does not call for the creation of such formations. This is perhaps to be expected of a political tendency which regards the sectarian isolation of the Comintern’s “red unions” in the Third Period as the high point of communist trade-union tactics (see “The Myth of the Third Period” in this issue), but it is contrary to the Leninist tradition that the PMLN claims to represent.

The PRT: Nicaragua’s Ostensible Trotskyists

The only other consequential “far left” organization in Nicaragua today is the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT) which is affiliated with the fake-Trotskyist International Workers League (IWL). A resolution of the IWL’s International Secretariat (published in the October 1986 issue of *Working Class Opposition*—WCO) reported that last May Day, the PRT put forward a six-point program which called for expropriating American corporations, cancelling the foreign debt and

nationalizing large companies and farms under workers control. These demands are fine as far as they go, but who is to implement them? The recently deceased Nahuel Moreno, the IWL’s historic *lider maximo*, made it pretty clear that they are addressed to the Sandinista comandantes: “...in Nicaragua, we must criticize the government because it does not expropriate the entire bourgeoisie, which in fact supports the *contras*. We must demand from the Sandinistas that they carry out that expropriation measure, indispensable for ending imperialist aggression” (WCO, December 1986).

The Morenoites cast the PRT in the role of a left pressure group on the Sandinista bonapartists, not as a Leninist opposition. The IWL resolution on Nicaragua concludes: “These proposals would guarantee the best defense of Nicaragua, while, at the same time, would open the door to transforming Nicaragua into a new Cuba, that is to say, into the second free territory of America.” This is their maximum program—a bureaucratically deformed workers state on the Cuban model.

Trotskyists seek to mobilize the proletariat for power through its own class organizations to establish a state ruled by the workers *directly*—not via the agency of petty-bourgeois formations like the FSLN or Castro’s July 26 Movement. The whole orientation of the pseudo-Trotskyist objectivists like the IWL is to look for some substitute for a Leninist vanguard as the agency of historical progress. The comrades of the PRT would do well to contemplate the fate of the Cuban Trotskyists when Castro came to power: their leaders were jailed, their newspaper suppressed and the printing plates for a Spanish edition of Trotsky’s *Permanent Revolution* were smashed.

This same mistaken orientation toward the FSLN leadership is evident in the September 1986 motion put forward by the Political Commission of the PRT which addressed the new constitution. While opposing the inclusion of “the triangle of bourgeois principles known as ‘mixed economy, political pluralism, and non-alignment’” and reiterating the demands advanced in the May Day statement, the PRT calls for a national assembly of recallable delegates from workplaces, farms, native communities and military units. This is in place of the urgently necessary call for the creation of workers councils.

This is no mere terminological fine point. Without the independent organization of the proletariat, it will not be possible to transcend the FSLN’s nationalist program of multi-class alliance. The PRT’s program proposes: “The President of the Republic must not have more powers than the unions and organizations of the masses. On the contrary, the President of the Republic...must consult and apply the decisions of the National Assembly of workers, peasants, soldiers and native representatives.” Instead of rule by the independent organizations of the class, extending from each factory and hacienda through regional and national bodies, the PRT proposes a more democratic parliament to *share* power (and political responsibility) with the FSLN president.

The struggle for workers power in Nicaragua requires a hard political break with the FSLN—and this is something the IWL is loath to do. Any attempt to estab-

lish independent organs of working-class power would soon meet with the resistance of the FSLN bonapartists in the National Palace. A regime which has indefinitely suspended the right to strike and has repeatedly censored the left press is hardly likely to welcome the creation of autonomous organs of proletarian rule. Yet without challenging the right of the FSLN to rule Nicaragua, it is impossible to move the revolution forward, to safeguard the gains to date and to crush the internal counterrevolution. While standing shoulder to shoulder with Daniel Ortega against the contras and their imperialist backers, Trotskyists place no political confidence in the petty-bourgeois FSLN leadership.

For A Leninist Party in Nicaragua!

The duty of Nicaraguan Bolsheviks is not only to defend the gains of the revolution to date and complete the social revolution by expropriating the contra's fifth column in COSEP (the main employers' federation), but also to spread the revolution beyond Nicaragua's frontiers. The geo-political realities of a single small state, integrated as a dependent and agrarian-based component in the international capitalist economic order, are such that even the elimination of market relations within Nicaragua would represent only a first step toward the liberation of the masses from the poverty and backwardness imposed on them by imperialism. The fate of the Nicaraguan revolution is inextricably tied up with the victory of the workers and peasants throughout the rest of Central and Latin America. In the final analysis, the Nicaraguan workers can only safeguard their revolution against imperialist attack by spreading it throughout the whole of Central America and linking up with the pow-

erful Mexican and South American proletariats.

Both the PMLN and the PRT stand qualitatively to the left of the Sandinistas. Yet each, in its own way, is the prisoner of a flawed political tradition. Both criticize the FSLN, but neither is prepared for a definitive break with the Sandinistas in the fashion of Lenin's break with the Provisional Government in Russia in April 1917. Lenin insisted: "The masses must be made to see that the Soviets of Workers' Deputies are the *only possible* form of revolutionary government." His governmental slogan was: "Not a parliamentary republic—to return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviets of Workers' Deputies would be a retrograde step—but a Republic of Soviets of Workers', Agricultural Laborers' and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country, from top to bottom" ("The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution," April 1917). This hard political opposition was the precondition for the Bolshevik October.

The triumph of the workers and oppressed masses of Nicaragua depends above all on the existence of the subjective factor—a firm party with a correct program. As Trotsky wrote of the Bolshevik insurrection of 1917: "One can say with certainty, however, on the basis of all the lessons of history, that had there been no Bolshevik Party the immeasurable revolutionary energy of the masses would have been fruitlessly spent in sporadic explosions, and the great upheavals would have ended in the severest counterrevolutionary dictatorship" ("Lessons of October," November 1935). Despite the undoubted heroism and dedication of militants in the PMLN, PRT and the mass organizations of the FSLN, there is no such party in Nicaragua today. The most urgent task for Nicaraguan revolutionaries is to create one. ■