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TRADE UNIONS IN NICARAGUA *by Alan Cheadle*

The recent vote by the House of Representatives to renew aid to the Contras supports the continued efforts of the Reagan Administration to overthrow the Sandanista government of Nicaragua. Most of the Administration's justification of the attack on the Sandanistas focuses on the alleged lack of democratic rights enjoyed by the Nicaraguan people. A small but important part of their argument has been directed at the lack of trade union rights, particularly the ban on strike activity only recently lifted prior to the November 1984 elections. The AFL-CIO has joined the Administration in condemning Sandanista trade union policies.

Several delegations of American trade unionists have visited Nicaragua, in an effort to learn the true picture of trade union activity. This article reports on some of what has been learned, drawing from "Nicaragua: Labor, Democracy and the Struggle for Peace," Report of the West Coast Trade Union Delegation to Nicaragua, and a forum held on the Berkeley campus, which was co-sponsored by the California Federation of Labor and the Labor Center.

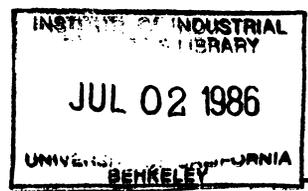
Trade Unions Under Somoza--One excuse given for U.S. and AFL-CIO support of the Somoza regime was its formal recognition of trade union rights. However, in spite of these nominal rights, trade union organizing was severely repressed. Several strikes in the early 1970s by construction, textile and suger refinery workers were declared illegal by the government, even though every prerequisite required by the law was fulfilled. Once declared illegal, all workers involved in the strikes were fired and their leaders arrested. According to one current trade union leader "... every trade unionist who was not in agreement with his government or with his boss was branded a communist subversive and thrown in jail. I can't remember a single union leader who didn't go to jail at least once for having participated in strike."

The Nicaraguan Labor Movement Today--There has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of workers organized since the Sandanistas came to power. In July 1979, there were 133 unions representing approximately 27,000 workers or 6% of the workforce. Today there are nearly 1100 unions representing 260,000 workers, or about 55% of the workforce, a ten-fold increase in five years. The largest union is the Sandanista Workers Confederation (CST) representing 112,700 workers in various manufacturing, transport and service industries. The second largest is the Association of Farm Workers (ATC) representing 43,000 agricultural workers. Both the CST and ATC describe themselves as Sandanista and are closely allied with the government.

The number of collective bargaining agreements has also increased dramatically under the Sandanistas. Only 160 agreements were signed during the 43 years of rule by the Somozas. Since 1979, over 1,000 agreements have been signed. The contracts are often ahead of U.S. contracts in their provisions which include full health and maternity coverage; subsidies for lunch, transportation and ocnsumer goods; and educational leaves and subsidies. Trade union input in the management of plants is also ahead of the U.S. level. At the TEXNICA textile plant, the factory is co-managed by the union and the plant administration, through joint union management committees.

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Ban on Strikes 1982-1984--As part of the national emergency brought about by the CIA-sponsored Contra aggression, strikes were banned in March, 1982. In spite of the ban, a number of strikes took place; construction workers in Leon, workers at the San Antonio Sugar Refinery, and workers reconstructing the National Stadium. Although technically illegal, no action was taken by the government to suppress the strikes--no injunctions, arrests or union busting. One of the leaders of the CST said that strike ban was never intended to suppress legitimate economic demand. Rather, it was enacted to prevent any organized attempt to cripple and bring down the government.

The West Coast delegation got first-hand experience with strikes in Nicaragua, since workers at the Victoria Brewery had conducted a five day strike to revise the wages awarded them under the national pattern. The strike was settled when a number of jobs at the brewery were upgraded, resulting in higher wages for the workers in those jobs. Talking with workers involved in the strike revealed some of the problems faced by the Nicaraguan trade union movement due to the Contra war. Several workers felt that their economic demands were legitimate and that the strike was justified even though it might damage the economy. Others felt a responsibility to the government to increase production and strengthen military defenses, and felt that a strike would weaken this effort.

Treatment of Opposition Unions--Two unions opposed to the policies of the Sandanista government are also the only two unions sanctioned by the AFL-CIO: the Nicaraguan Workers Confederation (CTN) with 2700 members and the Confederation of Trade Union Unity (CUS) with 1700. The leader of one faction of the CTN acknowledged that workers had made impressive advances in the last five years but noted that these gains had been at the expense of freedom and democracy. He charged that workers in the CTN had been victims of beatings, firings and imprisonment but also admitted that "some workers have been engaged in counter-revolutionary activity."

The CUS had two specific claims about maltreatment by the government, one apparently over a jurisdictional dispute with a Sandanista union. However further interviews revealed that the rank and file had voted to switch affiliation to the Sandanista union after the revolution, and that the move was mainly opposed by the pro-Somoza CUS leadership.

Conclusion--The conclusion reached by the West Coast Trade Union Delegation was that substantial gains for trade unions had been made under the Sandanistas. This view corresponds to that of others who have visited and/or studied the situation in Nicaragua. Based on this conclusion it is reasonable to support the Delegation recommendations (1) "That trade unions in the U.S. develop friendly relations with the labor movement of Nicaragua and support the efforts of Nicaraguan workers to rebuild and defend their country" and (2) "That the AFL-CIO revise its position on Nicaragua to more accurately reflect the realities of that country and to oppose U.S. aid to the Contras and all other U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua."

--Alan Cheadle

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