

# Lessons of losing power: the case of Nicaragua

Since winning the elections in February last year, the US-sponsored UNO coalition has tried to roll back the gains of the eleven-year old Sandinista revolution, but has met with fierce resistance from organised workers and peasants. Alejandro Bendana, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) Secretary for Foreign Affairs, visited South Africa late last year, and spoke to DEVAN PILLAY\* about the current situation in Nicaragua, in particular the extensive self-criticism the Sandinista's have been engaging in since losing the election.

A year ago, on February 25 1990, the Sandinista government of Nicaragua was voted out of office in favour of a US-backed coalition. Eleven years after the overthrow of the brutal Somoza dictatorship - years of hope and reconstruction amidst sustained US aggression - the revolutionary Sandinista movement could not muster more than 41% of the vote.

It was a devastating blow to all those who had placed their hopes in Nicaragua. It was seen as one of the few genuinely popular attempts to construct a new society, free from hunger, inequality and imperialist exploitation.

Was this merely a sign of the times - yet another indication of the 'failure' of socialism and its rejection by the people, as in Eastern Eu-



*Nicaragua in relation to the USA to the north*

rope and China? Or was this defeat the consequence of years of US-sponsored war with its severe impact on human lives and a fragile economy, compounded by errors of the revolutionary

movement?

As the new National Opposition Union (UNO) government, led by Violetta Chomorro, tries to roll back the many gains of the revolution, mass struggles by workers, students and peasants have erupted throughout Nicaragua. This is a strong indication that, unlike Eastern Europe, the vitality of the revolution still remains in the consciousness of a vast section of the population.

The FSLN remains the single largest and most cohesive political party in the national assembly. There are indications that they are trying to learn from their mistakes, and intend to re-establish the party, on a much firmer basis, as the next elected government.

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## The 1990 election defeat

In the (internationally-recognised) 1984 election the Sandinistas won 61 of the 96 seats in the national assembly and 67% of the vote. In 1990 they won only 39 seats and 41% of the vote. The UNO won 51 seats and 55% of the vote, while two other parties, the Social Christian Party and the Movement for Revolutionary Unity, won one seat each. In local elections, the UNO won 96 seats to the FSLN's 31. However, the UNO failed to win 60% (56) of the seats in the national assembly to enable them to change the constitution.

"The US did not expect us to lose the elections" says Bendana. Indeed, neither did the Sandinistas themselves, since most opinion polls predicted an FSLN victory. The UNO's election rallies were far smaller than the FSLN's.

The Sandinistas had calculated that only 15%, at most, of the population was right-wing. However, this was the "wrong question to ask", says Bendana. It was not just a question of sympathy for the revolution, but *organised* sympathy. It was also a question of how much discontent there was amongst the people, given their hardships. In fact, after ten years of fighting a US-sponsored

counter-revolutionary war, there was a deep war weariness amongst the people, and a "cry for peace" - peace, not by military means, but politically, says Bendana.

The election result was a blow to the Sandinistas. Looked at another way, however, the fact that the Sandinistas won 41% of vote showed, in Bendana's words, that "people were still willing to sacrifice". It showed "how far the revolution had penetrated" because four out of every ten people were prepared to *continue* to endure hardships imposed by the war and the siege economy, for the sake of preserving the revolution.

The Sandinistas had three objectives: to end the war, to win the elections and to preserve the revolution. They achieved two out of three: "Losing the elections was the price for preserving the revolution and stopping the war" argues Bendana.

The Sandinistas believe that, despite the continuing battle to prevent the rolling back of gains made by the revolution, they have neutralised the ultra-right

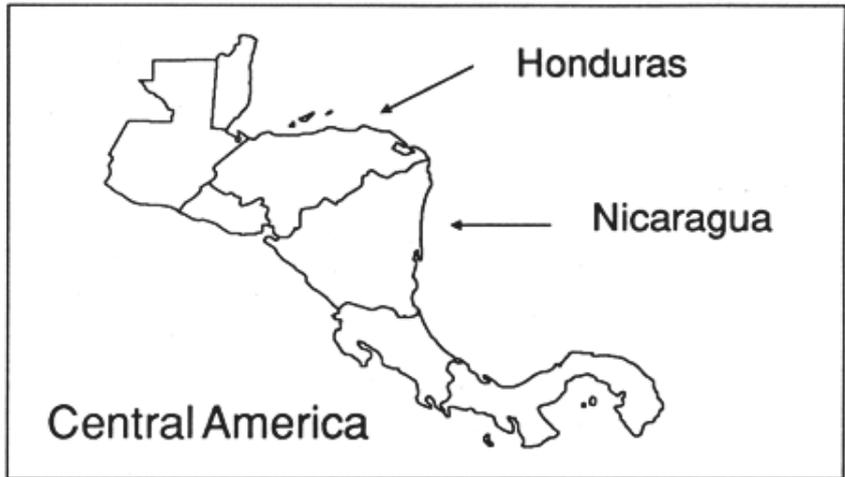
extremists, and committed the new government to respect the 1987 constitution which entrenches crucial democratic rights.

In addition, there is a commitment to respect the integrity of the armed forces created by the Sandinistas. If these institutions assume a non-partisan character, argues the FSLN, then "their very patriotic and popular formation constitutes, at this time, the best guarantee that they cannot be used as instruments of anti-popular repression".

Thus, the FSLN feel confident that, as things stand, the election defeat does not mean "the end of revolutionary works or the disappearance of the Sandinista organisations and institutions." (*Resolutions of the El Crucero Assembly, 17/6/90*).

### The UNO coalition

The UNO coalition consists of 14 different parties glued together by the USA. These include the ultra-right National Action Party, the rightwing Conservative Party, the Social Democratic



party, and even the Communist Party of Nicaragua (PCN). These parties, asserts Bendana, were "forced and bribed" by the US to come together in an unstable alliance against the Sandinistas.

While some Sandinistas hold out the possibility of winning over UNO votes on certain issues (see *International Labour Reports* No 40), these will not necessarily come from what, on the surface, seem to be the natural allies of the FSLN. The formerly pro-Moscow Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN) and the Maoist PCN hold 6 of the 51 UNO seats. Simple arithmetic shows that, if these two 'left' parties in the coalition defected to the Sandinistas, then the UNO and the FSLN would have 45 seats each. The two 'non-aligned' seats could then act as power brokers, with the possibility that, through skillful politicking, the FSLN could regain control of the national assembly.

However, these calculations do not seem to feature in the tactical perspectives of the FSLN, the main reason being that they see no possibility of getting cooperation from the PSN and PCN. In the face of popular unrest last year, these 'left' parties in the UNO coalition were silent. They have "no meaningful weight", explains Bendana, and their politics are motivated by "opportunism".

The PSN was in fact the 'official' communist party, formed in 1937, and banned

for most of its existence. Some of its members helped to form the FSLN in the early 1960s, and many more became Sandinistas in later years. The PSN, as such, opposed the Sandinista's guerilla strategy against Somoza, believing that conditions were not right. Instead, it formed alliances with non-socialist opposition parties, although after the 1979 revolution, when it was legalised, it gave critical support to the revolutionary government for a number of years. Their main grievance against the Sandinista government, according to Bendana, was that they were "not taken more into account".

The PCN is a 1967 pro-Chinese breakaway from the PSN, and, according to Bendana, is "not to be trusted". In the early years of the revolution, the PCN accused the Sandinistas of not being radical enough. It organised strikes and land seizures, and the government imprisoned a number of its leading officials. Yet now, says Bendana, the PCN espouses a view that there needs to be "further capitalist development" before socialism can be built - which in practice means that they support the rightwing policies of the new government. In this they aim to "give a human face to capitalism", says Bendana.

Both these parties have tiny support bases and, says Bendana, "no platforms of their own". Nor do they produce publications of any substance. They do, how-

ever, have a presence in the trade union movement, especially the PSN (see box on page 62).

The new Nicaraguan President, Violeta Chamorro, who does not belong to any of the parties in the UNO coalition, won 54,7% of the votes cast, as against 40,8% for the FSLN's Daniel Ortega. She leads a highly unstable coalition, with three distinct groups competing for power (CIIR, 1990).

Chamorro, herself, draws her support from the moderate Las Palmas Group, comprising 'modernising' entrepreneurs, relatives and friends. The most prominent figure amongst them is the *de facto* prime minister, Antonio Lacayo, leader of the Social Democratic Party (and former contra ally). Opposed to them is a group around the viciously anti-Sandinista Vice-President, Virgilio Godoy. He opposes Chamorro's willingness to negotiate with the FSLN. A third group is made up of conservative landowners and businessmen organised into the Superior Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP). They want a return to the order of the Somoza era.

Bendana observes that "No-one, not even the US, is optimistic about the present government". The Chamorro administration, with the assistance of the FSLN, has managed to avoid civil war breaking out (see later). But it faces a deepening crisis. It has not managed to disarm all the Contras; the USA has



*An FSLN banner depicting the alliance of workers, peasants, womens' and youth organisations*

*Photo: Peter auf der Heyde/Afrapix*

failed to give the financial aid it promised (because it believes the Chamorro government is not antagonistic enough towards the FSLN); and the economy is in a crippled state. The new government's radical free market economic policies are already eroding whatever popularity it has.

### **Workers oppose new economic policies**

Under the 'structural adjustment' prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the Chamorro government has curtailed social services, food subsidies and pension benefits. It has altered legislation favourable to popular interests and the trade unions, which had been de-

veloped during the course of the revolution', explained Bendana.

The first strike broke out five months after the 1990 elections, when mainly government employees protested against the suspension of the civil service law, which had been instituted by the Sandinista government, guaranteeing job security to senior government workers. The new government, however, wanted to sweep away the entire bureaucracy.

The CST trade union federation (see box on page 62) joined the strike because the government also wanted to revise the labour code, which provided for consultations with the unions over wage and other decisions.

The second strike oc-

curred in July over the arbitrary decrees of the new government. There was an attempt to roll back the agrarian reforms of the revolution (see later), as well as a failure to adjust the monthly wage index, which was linked to a rise in inflation. The unions demanded the right to be consulted on the closure of private and public industries and on forced privatisation (under US pressure), especially of co-operatives in the countryside. Workers were particularly opposed to the denationalisation of textile factories because of the threat of dismissals.

The government's economic policies were geared towards agro export interests, whereas there were no incen-

tives at all for manufacturing for domestic consumption and production of basic goods. Private companies were going bankrupt and the unions took up the defence of these companies, demanding tax relief for them, as the workers did not want to see production break down.

The political overtones of the strike, according to Bendana, lay in the awareness of workers that this was a new rightwing government which was determined to "measure how far they can go to dismantle the gains of the revolution". The workers had to draw a line: the government could not win the right to dismantle everything they had gained. It was a "test of wills", he says, but the government had to back off. It had to learn to negotiate with workers, and "take their interests into account" if it was to stabilise the economy and the country as a whole.

### Students take to the streets

The "fiscal necessity" imposed by the IMF and World Bank, says Bendana, has been largely responsible for the "situation of considerable unrest right now". Students have been particularly hard hit. They took to the streets during the July strikes, even going to the extent of building barricades, in protest against a 20% decrease in the university subsidy, an end to the students' transport subsidy, as well as an end to water and electricity subsidies. The government also



*Rural poverty and land hunger has led to mass resistance by peasants to attempts to grab their land*

*Peter auf der Heyde/Afrapix*

tried to curtail university autonomy, which had been established under the Sandinistas, and to increase education fees.

This was in the context of a rise in the cost of living of between 40-50% in the previous five months. The government tried to link the new currency to the dollar, but still paid salaries in the old currency, resulting in a great drop in living standards. Bendana concedes that, in many ways, the Sandinistas would have been forced to impose economic measures similar to those of the UNO government to deal with the economic crisis. They would have had to "decrease the massive government budget deficits" through reduced state spending and withdrawing "unproductive subsidies". However, he says, a Sandinista government would be "more sensitive than just throwing workers out onto the streets". Although its

measures would be painful, it would seek to relocate retrenched workers into other areas of the economy.

The UNO policies have led to a "jump in labour unrest" because the Chamorro government introduced its new economic policies without providing for a social cushion. The working people, while willing to sacrifice for a "government of the working class which provided gains from the revolution", were not willing to sacrifice "in the interests of the rich".

### Peasants defend their land

In the countryside there had also been a marked shift in the consciousness of the people since the revolution. When the Sandinistas were in power, land-hungry peasants occupied unused privately-owned land. This put pressure on the FSLN government to enact an agrarian reform law in 1981,

which provided for idle land to be confiscated and distributed to landless peasants, many of whom then formed co-operatives.

Since the 1990 election, the government has been trying to roll back the agrarian reforms, as absentee landlords have returned to the country demanding their land back. Former Contra rebels were also promised land by the UNO government. The small peasant producers and livestock owners, now organised into the National Union of Farm and Cattle Ranchers (UNAG), have been involved in a militant defence of the land. For, as Bendana says, they "feel that they have invested a considerable amount of labour in developing the land, and feel that it is now theirs. They do not want the fruits of their labour expropriated." This is in accordance with a principle of the revolution: the land is for those who work it. In many cases peasants have re-occupied land taken from them, resulting in violent confrontations with ex-Contra rebels.

In the war against the Contras, the Sandinistas armed the peasants. There are still many weapons in the countryside. The government wants to collect these weapons from the peasants and at the same time take over their property. This, says Bendana, is "hardly an inducement" to the peasants,

who feel that they need the arms to defend their property. He argues that, under the constitution, the government has to respect the agrarian reform "which the revolution put into place".

In September the FSLN and their allied trade union federation, the CST, entered into an agreement with the government, dubbed the *concertacion*, whereby the latter's right to implement a free market programme is accepted, on condition that it is done gradually, that agrarian reform is continued, ownership of state industries and privatised lands is transferred to workers and peasants, and reforms are introduced through constitutional means (CIIR, 1990).

The FSLN sees its task as pressurising the government on schools, clinics etc, and making sure that the Contras cease to exist. Bendana notes the irony of the politically unprecedented situation in Nicaragua, where "a right-wing government is in power, with a leftwing army". Usually it is the other way round.\*

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## Self criticism

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Ever since its electoral defeat, the FSLN and its allied mass organisations have im-

mersed themselves in intense discussion over why they lost. This discussion, which is on-going, has involved extensive self-criticism. This was reflected in the preliminary evaluation of the past ten years, made by the crucial El Crucero Assembly of the party's central committee with organisational representatives of the different social sectors, in June 1990. The FSLN's First National Congress in February this year will see a fundamental debate within the party as it seeks to overcome the errors of the past. Bendana sees the main errors as follows:

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### Confusion of party and government

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According to Bendana, the FSLN "made a mass confusion" between the people, party and government. The Sandinista government had some important successes. It brought down Nicaragua's illiteracy rate from 52% to 12%, reduced infant mortality through extensive health campaigns, and mobilised the youth to combat the US's Contra war.

However, to achieve this, people were drawn out of the party into bureaucratic roles in government. This weakened the party. At the same time, the party was turned, in Bendana's words, into "the Ministry of Political Mobilisation for the government". As such, the FSLN were held

\* Since September, however, Umberto Ortega, the FSLN head of the armed forces, has been replaced, and the size of the army drastically reduced



*Literacy in Nicaragua: one of the great achievements of the Sandinista revolution*

*Photo: Communication in popular Nicaragua (ig)*

responsible for government inefficiencies, failures and the mistakes that were made. One of the most serious of these was to underestimate the negative impact upon the people of obligatory military service imposed to conduct the war against the contras.

### Insufficient organisational democracy

The question of democracy was largely reduced to multi-partyism and elections with universal suffrage and the secret ballot. However, the

Sandinista Front, says Bendana, "had not democratised itself sufficiently". After 27 years it is only now, in February 1991, that the FSLN will have its first leadership elections and its first congress.

The Front, after it came to power, did not make organisational adjustments away from its vertical military orientation. It was, in Bendana's view, "accustomed to giving orders, and unaccustomed to listening". This was a function both of military necessity and of being in government. Bendana believes that "governments do not make revolutions - people

and parties make revolutions".

Bendana notes that where the FSLN was genuinely representative" was precisely where the revolution was strongest. The party won the 1990 elections in 19 major municipalities. He asks: "Why did we win in some and not in others?" The answer, he says, lies in the fact that there were "genuine leaders" in some areas and not in others. "The people can see which leaders are not with them."

### Loss of autonomy of mass organisations

The elections, says Bendana, taught the Sandinistas that there are three sources of power: the government, the army and the mass organisations. If the mass movement is organised, then victory is assured. However, insufficient emphasis was placed on this. The mass movement was "not sufficiently autonomous and democratic", he says.

Under the Sandinistas, the mass organisations were excessively professionalised, with cadres even placed on the government payroll, causing them to cease to rely on the community itself. This meant that, after the 1990 election defeat, aspects of party and mass organisation collapsed because they lost the support that they had come to expect from government.

Equally importantly, the Sandinistas did not distinguish clearly between leaders of the party and of mass organisations. In the past, the

leaders of mass organisations - youth, rural and urban unions, women - were members of the FSLN. There was, says Bendana, "a tendency to appoint or delegate leaders" to the mass organisations. Now, however, through the process of self-criticism, there is "more of a democratic impulse. We are talking amongst ourselves."

The civic Committees for the Defence of the Revolution played a critical role during the war, but Bendana feels that it was a "mistake to draw them into the party and government". It is now felt that those leadership positions are best filled by Sandinista sympathisers rather than cadres, because "it is sometimes better to strengthen the party from outside the party". The FSLN now believes that there is a great need for mass organisations to be independent of the party although, in Bendana's view, not all Sandinista cadres necessarily understand this principle.

### Combining national and sectoral concerns

Initially, the revolutionary Sandinista government was too influenced by the East European model. There was a "lack of confidence in the masses", says Bendana, and it is now the task of the organisations to become "more responsive to the bottom". Before the revolution, organisations of women, youth, teachers and so on were small nuclei which acted as

support groups to the FSLN, with particular sectoral responsibilities. During the revolutionary war, they began to "divert their agenda points", says Bendana, and concentrate on what the FSLN demanded from them to preserve the revolution.

Bendana believes that



*Viva AMN LAE! - Long live the Women's Organisation of Nicaragua*

*Photo: Communication in popular Nicaragua (ig)*

there has to be a "correct balancing of national concerns and local concerns". It is "indispensable to distinguish between national and sectoral demands" and to allow mass organisations to mobilise independently around their sectoral demands.

The FSLN, as a national party, tries to represent the interests of the whole nation. As such, it is constantly concerned to try and balance the different forces. But "that is

not the priority of sectoral organisations", says Bendana. They must focus on their own concerns, which will give the masses a greater capacity to debate policy with the national front.

For much of 1990, organised women, youth, teachers, and the revolutionary defence committees have been immersed in internal discussions. They now want elections for the leaderships of their organisations to be held, and "they are defining what they demand of the Frente (Front) as women, youth, etc." They want to know whether their concerns and objectives are being incorporated into the Front's programme and objectives. This is particularly so in the case of the trade unions "the most organised of all the mass organisations" (see box on page 62).

### Revolutionary crackdowns

The Sandinistas have also questioned the correctness of their actions against rightwing forces during their period in power. At one point the Sandinista government shut down the rightwing newspaper *La Prensa*. They also cracked down on rightwing trade unions, and expelled from the country catholic bishops who were harbouring Contras.

The movement now asks whether the costs were greater than the benefits. It seems, on balance, that their actions served to hinder the

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## Ethnic minorities and Nicaraguan nationalism

**T**he Meskito 'Indians' are indigenous people who reside on the East (Atlantic) Coast of Nicaragua, the region where most of the country's black (ex-slave) population is also found. It is a sparsely populated, geographically isolated area, where less than 4% of the total population live.

The Meskito, says Bendana, "never felt part of the Nicaraguan nation", because the revolution never took place there. There was never a struggle against Somoza, because he largely ignored the area, leaving it to the Americans to exploit. There was no "pre-existing commonhood in search of an identity", says Bendana, and "no anti-imperialist consciousness" existed amongst the Meskitos. Essential common ingredients were lacking.

Thus, serious problems arose when the revolution was introduced in the area "where the revolution had not taken place", with the result that the "we ran up against prejudice and mutual misunderstandings on both sides", feels Bendana.

There was an initial effort to introduce literacy amongst the Meskito in their own language, and to "promote the protection of their own language". This, it was felt, gave recognition to the Meskito need for self-expression and autonomy. However, the Sandinistas soon discovered that it was not only a problem of indigenous culture, "but also a deep-rooted colonial mentality among the leaders of the Meskitos, who tended to be Moravian priests".

This colonial mentality arose out of a hundred years of occupation by the British, who promoted an anti-Spanish attitude amongst the indigenous population. (In fact the area had much more in common with English-speaking Belize, which in 1981 split off from Guatemala and became independent.) Thus a colonialist culture and structure was pitted against the new revolutionary culture and organisation from the Spanish-speaking part of

the country. Furthermore, the latter did "not come from below, but from above", Bendana stresses.

The Moravian priests were very conservative, and very influential as spiritual and community leaders. They adopted a stance against the Sandinistas whom they saw as atheistic. It was the case of "new forms of thought upsetting traditional structures of domination". These problems combined with a number of other factors to make the Meskito's vulnerable to counter-revolutionary pressures in the early years of the revolution.

Nicaragua's east coast had been both ideologically and economically colonised. The local economy before the revolution was controlled by American interests, in particular the mines, fishing and lumber industries. There was an abrupt US withdrawal from the area at the time of the revolution, particularly after the mines were nationalised. The Atlantic coast held no strategic value in military terms. Once its economic potential was virtually exhausted, there was no real incentive for American economic interests to stay. They destroyed the mining equipment when they left, resulting in massive unemployment. Prior to this, when they left the fishing industry, Somoza had sold off the fishing boats. And the lumber companies left primarily because they had wiped out much of the forest - and paid no taxes whilst doing so.

The US withdrawal led to rapid economic decline in the region, which upset the way of life of the Meskito. The area became poverty-stricken as the people were deprived of their main sources of employment. This was further compounded by the war with the Contras. Because all this coincided with the revolution, the Meskitos blamed the Sandinistas.

These objective problems were further compounded by the fact that the "revolution had not sent its best cadres" to the region to sort out the problems. There were severe



## Ethnic minorities in Nicaragua

*"The peoples of the Atlantic Coast - autonomy means to recognise equal rights for all ethnic groups, regardless of their number" (published in El Tayacán [Managua], 1985)*

*Map: Communication in popular Nicaragua (ig)*

communication problems, as well as an "historical resentment towards anything Spanish". The region was only nominally under Nicaraguan sovereignty. The revolution to the Mestikos meant merely another change in government which they felt had nothing to do with them.

By 1981, political and cultural differences between the Mestikos and the Sandinistas came to a head, and the US became involved. They tried to reach out to the Moravian leaders, and draw the Mestikos "to the counter-revolutionary army based in Honduras", where they hoped to "induce them to become part of the Contra army". Thus a vicious circle developed, with suspicion on both sides.

By 1984, "the revolution knew it had to respond politically, not militarily, and try to address what the Mestiko was fighting for". The FSLN had come to realise that Mestiko opposition was not an imperialist plot, but an expression of "local grievances and demands". These, Bendana feels, were not

incompatible with the revolution. Thus the first autonomy project was initiated, through a process of common discussions. This led to their own laws and their own forms of organisation being implemented, in other words, a larger measure of self-determination, not only politically but also in terms of control over their resources.

By 1987, autonomy for the Mestikos was entrenched in the constitution. Many authorities of the area eventually became Mestiko, including the police and army. This led to the Mestikos identifying their autonomy with defence against the Contras, who were still trying to force them to fight against the revolution. According to Bendana, the message came across to both sides. "We learnt that there could be no revolution without autonomy, and they learnt that there could be no autonomy without the revolution". The autonomy they had gained, says Bendana, is "irreversible, even the new government cannot reverse it". ♦

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revolution rather than defend or advance it. In Bendana's view, it probably pushed many people towards the side of the counter-revolution, and gave the US more ammunition with which to continue its aggressive policies towards Nicaragua.

The question of the church was a particularly sensitive problem. There had been a long-running battle with the hierarchy of the official church, although the Sandinistas, says Bendana, were the "first to promote Christians in the revolution". There were three priests in the cabinet who espoused a revolutionary Christian thought. Christian communities were mobilised for the revolution, and the popular church emerged. The official catholic church, however, tried to stifle this development and Pope John Paul publicly attacked the Sandinistas. With the crack-down on some bishops, says Bendana, "We are not sure we came out winning because of the strong religious sentiments of the people".

### Imposing cultural conformity

The revolution made another error in imposing a degree of conformity on the cultural life of the Nicaraguan people. It encouraged artists to "promote the culture of the revolution", states Bendana, which had the effect of confining the artistic community to "the promotion of the rev-



*La Prensa attacks the idea of a Christian Sandinista militant*

*Photo: Communication in popular Nicaragua (ig)*

olution's social, political and military objectives."

However, many artists did not want to restrict their creativity in such a way. It took a while to realise the necessity to "promote all forms of culture previously restricted to a few", says Bendana.

In promoting only a 'revolutionary culture', many people, in particular the youth, became alienated. In Cuba this 'revolutionary culture' has been strictly enforced, with the result that "Cubans now have problems with the youth", observes Bendana. Nicaraguan youth, too, were made to listen to 'revolutionary songs' or, where pop music was allowed, it was confined to 'revolutionary rock'n roll. The danger in this was most clearly seen during the 1990 elections when the UNO brought in American pop groups who seduced the youth.

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## Trade Union Movement

Nicaragua has a number of trade union groups, each of which is allied to a political party. By far the largest, with well over 100 000 members and 608 affiliates, is the Sandinista Workers Confederation (CST), which was formed in 1979 out of a range of pro-Sandinista unions that had been clandestinely engaged in the struggle against Somoza. These unions were the largest before the revolution and were consciously organised around the task of insurrection.

Closely allied to the CST is the Association of Agricultural Workers (ATC), also officially launched in 1979, which represents around 150 000 agricultural workers on private and state farms. Another Sandinista-allied union is the more than one hundred thousand strong National Union of Farm and Cattle Ranchers (UNAG), formed in 1981 to represent the interests of private agricultural producers including cooperatives.

The 15 000 strong General Confederation of Labour - Independent (CGT), which split from the Somoza-dominated CGT in 1968, is tied to Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN). This confederation describes its

self as 'Marxist-Leninist' and generally supported the Sandinista government, although at times it organised strikes against it.

The much smaller Confederation for Action and Trade Union Unity (CAUS), formed in the mid-1970s, is allied to the Communist Party of Nicaragua

(PCN), and gave critical support to the Sandinista government. Another left-oriented union is the Workers Front (FO), which is tied to the Trotskyist Popular Action Movement - Marxist Leninist (MAP-ML), and also has a few thousand members.

On 12 May 1990, a National Workers Front (FNT) was formed by the CST, ATC and other Sandinista-aligned unions - including the health union (FETSALUD, 19 000 members), the public sector union (UNE, 45 000 members), the technicians union (CONAPRO), and the journalists union (UPN) - as well as the Workers' Front.

There are three main rightwing unions, each representing less than 2 000 workers, which campaigned for the UNO during the 1990 election, and which receive funding and training from the American AFL-CIO. These are : the 18-year old Nicaraguan Workers Confederation (CTN), which is tied to the Social Christian Party (PSC), split in 1982. It now has a rival, the Independent Nicaraguan Workers Confederation, which in Bendana's opinion "nobody takes seriously". The third group, the ICFTU-affiliated Confederation of Trade Union Unity (CUS), is tied to the misleadingly named Social Democratic Party (PSD). Formed in 1962, the CUS's membership dwindled significantly after the revolution.

These rightwing unions strongly opposed the Sandinista government, and tried to channel workers grievances, in particular over the budget and taxes, towards challenging the legitimacy of the government. But now, says Bendana "the shoe is on the other foot", and the UNO government is forced to recognise the



Nicaraguan workers

Photo: New Era

dominant Sandinista unions. This has to some extent alienated the CTN, given the intense competition in many workplaces over the affiliation of unions to one of the federations.

During the period of Sandinista rule, the Sandinista unions found themselves in

the unfortunate position of having to defend the government. This, Bendana feels, "was a real problem in the light of a deteriorating situation for workers". These hardships were a great test for the leadership. There were attempts to promote increased community and worker initiative to solve problems. Workers' stores were set up, where workers produced clothing and exchanged them for processed food at lower prices. Straight barter arrangements were made, where cooperatives producing foodstuffs exchanged them for factory goods.

There were "moments of strain" in the union-government relationship, says Bendana, although "not to breaking point". These mainly concerned bad management practices. Workers, says Bendana, "were angry because they were forced to sacrifice, while management made mistakes, or were corrupt". There was also resentment about the privileges - such as special shops - for state functionaries and higher party cadres (International Viewpoint, 26/3/90).

After the revolution, management had to adjust to the new mentality of labour, otherwise it would not have been able to operate. Under the UNO government, there have been attempts to reintroduce the pre-revolution mode of relationship, but these have not been successful. The Sandinista government allowed workers a large measure of participation in management decision-making, in particular in cooperatives. Workers therefore know how to look at company books and know about bank arrangements, and are in good position to continue the struggle. ♦

## International Solidarity

Although the international Nicaraguan Solidarity movement was the greatest international solidarity movement, after the international anti-apartheid movement, Bendana feels that it was still insufficient. It was important enough to prevent the US from invading the country, but more could have been done to sustain the solidarity pressure. He feels that the solidarity movement, in which the international religious community provided the backbone of support, put a "disproportionate amount of effort into the USA".

The Eastern Bloc countries had provided crucial support during the revolution, but with its collapse, Bendana feels, it is now necessary to "forge another type of International". This, however, still needs to be thoroughly debated. The July 19 Sandinista Youth, for example, is divided on the issue. Some leaders believe that the FSLN should join the social democratic Socialist International. Henrie Petric, its full-time coordinator, believes that "We need to win more political space internationally. The so-called social democracy played an important role in support of the Nicaraguan revolution." However Carlos Fonseca Teran, the son of the founder of the FSLN Carlos Fonseca, disagrees: "I'm opposed because we are not social democrats. It is the way Marxism-Leninism has been

practised that is in crisis, not Marxism-Leninism itself" (*The Militant* 2/11/90)

The Sandinistas' belief in political pluralism has not affected its relationship with the Cuban Communist Party. There is a very close relationship and a deep respect for each other's right to develop their own system to suit their particular conditions. Generally, the FSLN strives to open a dialogue "with as many groups as possible", says Bendana. Besides the Cubans, they have particularly close relations with the Workers Party of Brazil, which last year almost won the presidential elections there (see WIP 67). They are also close to the FMLN in El Salvador and the National Revolutionary Union of Guatemala.

## Debate to continue in party congress

The way forward in the new conditions "will be refined at the February congress of the FSLN", says Bendana. The Sandinistas, he says, have always believed in "political pluralism, a mixed economy and non-alignment", and that the path to socialism lies "through defence of integral democracy".

Since 1961, when the FSLN was formed, it has had

a strong Marxist current but it has never, says Bendana, "proclaimed socialism as an objective". When the Sandinistas came to power, unlike Cuba, they did not aim to create a 'Marxist-Leninist' state. It was the working class, particularly through their unions, that spoke of socialism.

The broad front perspective of the FSLN requires that it appeals to the broadest possible sectors of the population, in order to "maintain our hegemony of popular interests". But this imposes a dilemma: how does the Front continue to attract the widest support without losing its revolutionary core? How does it ensure that the capacity of the revolution to advance is not halted?

The FSLN have argued against embarking on a strategy of insurrection against the Chamorro government because "these are our rules" that they are playing under, says Bendana. They cannot govern without the Sandinistas' cooperation, and "it is not in our interests to force a collapse".

These are issues that will be dealt with at the February congress, with strong input from the mass organisations which, as indicated earlier, have now refused to allow their particular concerns - as workers, women, youth, etc - to be swamped by the national concerns of the Front.

### References

Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR)  
*"Update on Nicaragua: After the 1990 Elections"* (Nov 1990).



## Conference on 'Marxism in South Africa - past, present and future'

**A** three-day conference on 'Marxism in South Africa - Past, Present and Future' is to be held at the University of the Western Cape, under the auspices of UWC's Marxist Theory Seminar, from Friday 6 to Sunday 8 September 1991. The conference provides a forum for assessment of the achievements and limitations of Marxist theory and practice in SA, and debate on the way forward in the changed conditions of the 1990s.

**C**ontributions are invited on topics concerning the historical development of Marxism in SA; theoretical issues of Marxist economics, politics, philosophy, etc, especially as these relate to SA; and problems and prospects for building a Marxist tradition in SA today.

**E**nquiries to: **Marxist Theory Seminar**  
c/o Department of Philosophy  
University of the Western Cape  
Private Bag X17  
Bellville  
7535.

## LABOUR RESEARCH SERVICE

### Temporary research posts for returning South Africans

**T**he Labour Research Service intends to create one or two "temporary research posts" for returning South Africans. Successful applicants will undertake research projects commissioned by the Labour Research Service in the fields of wages & bargaining, company and industrial analysis, and economic policy as it affects trade unions. A further possible subject would be investment analysis. The posts will be for a minimum of three and a maximum of six months. These positions will particularly suit persons needing transitional employment prior to serving in the trade union movement.

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**T**he successful applicants for these posts are likely to have an economics degree and research experience, and must be returning South Africans.

**T**he salary is fixed, and no fringe benefits are offered. Some assistance with removal expenses may be available.

**A**pplications for these posts, containing full details of experience and qualifications, together with the names of two referees, should be made in writing to:

**T**he Labour Research Service, P.O. Box 376, Salt River 7925, Cape Town, South Africa.

**T**here is no deadline for applications.