

Ten years of freedom for Nicaraguan people

The Nicaraguan people celebrated ten years of Revolution this July. An end to the war waged by the US-backed Contras is in sight, but the economy is in ruins. In this interview Andres Zamora, International Relations Secretary of the Nicaraguan health workers' union FETSALUD, talks about the role of workers and trade unions in the Revolution. The interview first appeared in *International Labour Reports* (ILR).

ILR: *How would you describe the relationship of your union FETSALUD and other pro-Sandinista unions to the Sandinista Party FSLN and to the Nicaraguan government?*

AZ: It's important to understand that the FSLN is a party that runs throughout the people, it's not run just for its leaders. As a union that defends the people, FETSALUD has common interests with the FSLN. There is no

difference between the work that we do as a union, and the work that the FSLN does as a party.

As a revolutionary health union, we have three main objectives. Our first fundamental principle is the defence of our Revolution. The second is to work towards the improvement of the health of the population, and the third is to better the socio-economic conditions of our health workers. The three objectives are of equal importance, and go hand-

in-hand.

We believe that our job is to reinforce our government because it was us that elected this government, once in 1984 in the last elections, and before that in 1979 in the revolution.

Yet we are sometimes critical of the work of both the party and government. For example, when an administrative representative of the State wants to just wash over the complaints that the health workers have and dictate a line, that's when contradictions arise. But we suggest ways that things can be done better. We are not only a union that makes demands, we are also involved in the administration of our country.

ILR: *How difficult is it in practice to balance these different priorities?*

AZ: I believe that the people have a higher level of political awareness than ten years ago. The people have identified that the economic problems are caused by the war waged by the US to try to destroy our Revolution by any means.

The workers are not going to ask for things that would put the Revolution in danger, because we are sure that the economic problems we face now are a stage that the Revolution is going through and are not going to last for the rest of our lives. It's for that reason that we struggle for peace.

Within FETSALUD, we haven't forgotten the anti-union repression we suffered before the Revolution. Somoza tried to destroy our union. During a strike by health workers in 1978,

many of our leaders were tortured and killed, and 60% of the health workers were sacked. Now we have the freedom to organise, and we have been able to consolidate ourselves as a union. 22 000 out of 24 000 health workers in Nicaragua are members of FETSALUD, from hospital cleaners to specialist doctors.

ILR: *How has the lifting of the State of Emergency in January 1988 affected trade union rights and activities?*

AZ: The 'fundamental forces' and

Who's who?

FETSALUD, the only union for health workers in Nicaragua, is part of the 'fuerzas fundamentales' (fundamental forces), a grouping of revolutionary unions, which includes the Sandinista Workers' Confederation CST, the peasants' ATC, the teachers' ANDEN, the public sector workers' UNE, and the journalists' UPN.

Anti-Sandinista unions of both the right and left are grouped under the Permanent Council of Workers (CPT), whose largest affiliate, the Confederation of Trade Union Unity (CUS), has close ties with the American Institute of Free Labour Development (AIFLD) of the US national union centre AFL-CIO. ☆

the CPT unions (see box) had two meetings, in October 1988 and April 1989. In April it was decided to form a commission with one delegate from each union, in particular to agree on a

new Labour Code to present to the National Assembly, and to tackle the problem of unemployment.

We hoped for co-operation from all sides of the trade union movement

Fighting war, disease and the hurricane

Health workers have been a major target of attacks by the US-backed Contra terrorists. Up to January 1987, 47 health workers had been killed, 31 kidnapped, and 25 raped or tortured by the Contras. 120 health centres were destroyed or closed down due to Contra attacks.

Yet there have been major achievements. Polio, measles and whooping cough have been eradicated or brought under control. Infant mortality has been reduced by 50%, and over 500 new health facilities have been built.

TEACHERS TEST RIGHT TO STRIKE

The lifting of the State of Emergency in January 1988 restored the constitutionally-guaranteed right to strike. However, the Nicaraguan economy has been devastated by years of war and Hurricane Joan, which caused an estimated US\$824

million of damage and fuelled hyperinflation. Inflation was reduced to 150% in early 1989 by public spending cuts. Workers who go on strike have been charged with destabilising the economy.

In May 1989, some 3 000 of Nicaragua's 36 000 teachers, members of the teachers' union ANDEN, staged a strike to press for improved benefits and wage increases. ANDEN leaders denounced the strike, accusing right-wing parties of manipulating the dispute to force a confrontation with the government.

In a public meeting between President Daniel Ortega and 1 400 teachers, Miriam Corrales, a teacher from Esteli, defended the strike. "Why are we called 'Contras' when we ask for higher wages?" Corrales asked. "We have been at the forefront of mobilisations to end illiteracy, to vaccinate children, and to defend the Revolution. We ask that we be given the recognition we deserve as educators."

At the meeting President Ortega announced improved benefits including hardship pay for rural teachers, free transportation, free eyeglasses, decentralisation of the Ministry of Education, and a 14% wage increase in line with other government workers. ☆

which would filter down to the workplace. But the obstructive stance of right-wing unions like CUS (see box) has made any effective dialogue very difficult. Their knee-jerk reaction is to say that everything the Government does is bad and 'anti-worker'. But we will continue to strive for more co-operation.

The problem is to know what kind of democracy our critics want in Nicaragua. It's difficult to arrive on a common definition of democracy. I believe that democracy is what we have built in Nicaragua.

For workers in the health sector, democracy is reducing infant mortality to half the rate under Somoza, and not having one case of polio since 1982.

For FETSALUD, democracy is having 22 000 members, and having union representation in all the health units in the country.

Democracy is having the right to meet with the representatives of the Ministry of Health to discuss how to improve the health system. Under Somoza, nearly all the hospital managers were lieutenants and captains in the National Guard.

Next February, 22 parties will contest the elections in Nicaragua, including the FSLN. But democracy does not just mean going out to vote every few years. It is something that you have to build every day.

ILR: *You celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, what are the prospects for peace and an economic upturn?*

AZ: The war is not yet over, and the economic blockade by the US continues. With the US\$66 million of 'humanitarian' aid that was given to the Contras by the US Congress in April 1989, the Contras continue to attack co-operatives, public and private transport, and peasant communities.

Even if we were to reach a definitive peace today, the effects of this war, which has cost us some 60 000 lives, would still last for many years.

But morale is high in Nicaragua. We are quite sure of the role that the Nicaraguan Revolution is taking historically to form an example for other countries not only in Latin America but elsewhere in the Third World.

The principle objective of the Revolution hasn't been lost, that is to create a more just society, based on a mixed economy and political pluralism. This is why we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Revolution in high spirits, with people who have suffered, with people who have played their part. ☆