

## JANET BURSTALL takes a look at Nicaragua seven and a half years after the overthrow of the hated Somoza dictatorship

The debate among revolutionary socialists about Nicaragua is not a debate over whether or not the Sandinistas have brought progressive change to Nicaragua,

Clearly there have been significant and remarkable gains over the days of Somoza — routine state killings are ended, civil liberties are high by Latin American, and even world standards, literacy and health campaigns have been far reaching, and there has been a considerable land reform.

But is Nicaragua socialist? Have the Sandinistas carved out a new strategy for socialism? Or are they radical nationalists? Is it necessary for the working class in Nicaragua to organise itself independently of the FSLN government and to be prepared for government opposition to a fight for its interests, for power to its own organisations, and for socialist measures against the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie?

Let's look at the facts.

1. 60% of the Nicaraguan economy is privately owned. There is a state monopoly on banking. The bourgeoisie does not participate in the central organs of state, but is represented on various economic planning bodies.

2. Extensive assistance is given to the private sector by the government, and profits have recovered much more rapidly than wages. War, blockade, and natural disasters have pushed down standards of living. However government policies have also caused real wages to fall since the abolition of subsidies on the prices of certain basic necessities, in February 1985. 'Profitability' is also the accepted basis of the state-owned sector. About one-quarter of land has been redistributed. Rights of ownership are only challenged if productive capacity of property is not utilised, or if assistance is given to the Contras.

3. The national political structures are bourgeois democratic. The National Assembly delegates serve for set terms and are not subject to immediate recall. There are no workers' councils. In fact, "The real centre of political power, both legislative and executive, has always been the National Directorate of the FSLN" (Weber, p.66); "the National Directorate...function(s) more or less as the effective government of the country, as do the Politbureaus in Eastern Europe" (Henri Weber, 'The Sandinista Revolution', p.78). "In a telling gesture...



An FSLN women's militia

# Is Nicaragu

Junta members were introduced on their arrival in Leon on 18 July by Tomas Borge, thereby underlining the fact that the National Directorate of the FSLN was the ultimate authority of the Revolution" (George Black, 'Triumph of the People', p.171).

Symbolically, the members of the FSLN National Directorate have been given the title 'Comander (Comandante) of the Revolution'.

The FSLN is not so much a party as the central core of the state: the army is a *Sandinista* army (and it "has been constantly alert to the dangers of infiltration both by right-wing Somocistas and cadres from the ultra-left..." — Black, p.225).

The Militias were disbanded soon after July 1979 and re-formed under Sandinista control. The police are Sandinista. The CDSs are 'Sandinista' Defence Committees. The municipal juntas (local government) are unelected coalition bodies nominated by the Sandinistas. When the right-wing in Nicaragua go on about the FSLN confusing party and state, they have their own axes to grind, but the observation is true.

4. The FSLN has never been a working-class party, but a multi-class coalition which has developed its programme around a combination of interests — peasant, small business, anti-Somoza and nationalist bourgeoisie and working class.

It is a militarised, top-down movement. "So far, the party has been created from the top down, with little sign of internal life below the level of the National Directorate itself" (Weber, p.79).

The National Directorate is not elected. The way it conducted the struggle against Somoza is well summed up by Humberto

**"The facts allow only one class in Nicaragua neither through its main mass or a political party...built on class programme."**

Ortega: "The truth is that we always thought of the masses, seeing them, however, as a prop for the guerrilla campaign that would enable it to deal some blows at the National Guard. Reality was quite different: guerrilla activity served as a prop for the masses..." (Quoted in Weber, p.49-50).

The FSLN recruited mainly, in fact almost exclusively, from students: it was the majority force among Nicaraguan students from the late '60s (Black, p.85), but for the majority of the working people it was 'the hand of the avenger' from outside.

It did begin to organise the Association



## a socialist?

of Rural Workers (ATC), but only from March 1978, and the ATC had committees in only four of Nicaragua's 16 departments by 1979 (Black, p.144, p.272). "Taken together, all three Sandinista tendencies numbered barely 200 in 1977, and no more than 500 when they entered Managua on 19 July 1979" (Weber, p.55).

**Conclusion: the working class holds state power through mass organisations, nor through the basis of a working**

5. The main mass organisations are the CDS (Sandinista Defence Committees), the women's organisation (AMNLAE), the Sandinista Youth and the Sandinista trade unions. 'Face the People' sessions are consultative, but have no power. The main role of AMNLAE and Sandinista Youth is to support the decisions of the FSLN leadership. The CDS are directed from above.

The mass organisations have been mostly created since the Sandinista seizure of power. The major mass working class organisations of before July 1979 — the trade unions — were bypassed.

The Sandinista trade union federation has been created entirely since July 1979. It does do some things in pursuit of workers' interests against the capitalists, and it is not 100% controlled by the state, but its whole bias is towards mobilising the workers behind the Sandinistas. Other trade unions (i.e. those existing before July 1979) have not been banned, but the Sandinistas have tried to squeeze them to the advantage of the CST.

George Black's comments on this are very revealing: "Somoza's brutal repression of the trade union movement ultimately works to the Frente's advantage. The low level of previous unionisation means that more than 90% of workers have no experience of trade unionism within a bourgeois state, and although formidable weaknesses in class consciousness may partly benefit organisations like the CTN (the Christian unions) in the short term, there is no question of Sandinista hegemony over the workers' movement or the concept of worker control of production being seriously challenged from a position of strength". (p.279). What Black thinks he is saying is that the revolutionaries are free from obstruction by conservative, reformist and economic trade unionists. What in fact he is saying is that independent working class organisation is too weak to act as an effective restraint on the middle class

nationalist revolutionaries.

6. Workers' self-organisation existed for a time in the form of some workers' control of factories when owners were leaving the country or decapitalising. However all enterprises now have managers who are firmly in control. The workers' participation which does exist is essentially directed at increasing productivity.

The facts allow only one conclusion: the working class in Nicaragua neither holds state power through its mass organisations, nor through a political party which has been built on the basis of a working class programme and working class struggle, and which provides a forum for the political debates of the vanguard of the class. The FSLN is not such a party.

The Sandinistas' programme for the foreseeable future, is for the maintenance of a controlled form of capitalism, under the name 'mixed economy'.

The standard of living of the Nicaraguan workers and peasants can only be ameliorated within Nicaragua's own borders. But the *fundamental* causes of poverty and all-round economic backwardness cannot be overcome except on an *international* basis. But the Sandinistas subordinate their international policy to domestic economic development. Their international policy seems to be carried out just as the government's foreign policy — rather than as international political organising by the FSLN, independent of diplomatic considerations.

Nicaragua is a small, weak country. Socialists in such a country need to link up with more powerful working classes in Guatemala, El Salvador, and above all Mexico. Yet the Sandinistas' main efforts have been to secure diplomatic friendships with the Mexican capitalist class (not a wrong effort in principle, so far as it goes), rather than linking with the Mexican workers.

But arguments are advanced that the Sandinistas are on the road to power in the hands of the self-organised working class, and socialism.

Nicaragua is quite possibly on the 'Cuban road'. The bourgeois state of Somoza was smashed by the Sandinistas and Nicaraguan masses in 1979. However, the Sandinistas are following a typically Stalinist policy of pursuing a period of the 'progressive' development of capitalism and bourgeois democracy. It is not at all inevitable that the Sandinistas will carry over to the nationalisation of the bulk of the economy, even though they will probably defeat the Contras. If and when the Sandinistas do move against private property, it is likely to be done bureaucratically, to minimise the role of the working class and keep it under control. We advocate independent working class politics, so that the working class can expropriate the bourgeoisie in Nicaragua and commence the construction of socialism and its spread throughout Central America.