CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:
REVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA

In July 1979 there was another blow to U.S. imperialism. In the wake of the Iranian revolution the workers and peasants of Nicaragua, led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), overthrew the Somoza dictatorship. U.S. Marines had installed Anastasio Somoza as dictator in 1933. Power passed to his son Luis and then to Anastasio, Jr., who was finally brought down by guerrilla warfare combined with urban insurrections in the country’s cities. The FSLN’s overthrow of Somoza was the lone victory by any of the many guerrilla movements throughout Latin America inspired by the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

The FSLN took its name from Augusto César Sandino, who led a six-year war against the U.S. Marines that, with a few interruptions, had occupied Nicaragua beginning in the early 20th century. Washington imposed governments of its choosing in this period. In 1927, Sandino, a general in the army, revolted when the United States imposed one of its client regimes. He came from plebian roots, and looked to the workers and peasants as the driving forces of the struggle for national liberation. Historian Matilde Zimmermann, who ran as the SWP candidate for Vice President in 1980, would later write, “The efforts of Sandino’s peasant army, combined with growing opposition to the intervention inside the United States, led to the withdrawal of American troops in 1933. Sandino was assassinated in 1934 at the orders of Anastasio Somoza Garcia, the commander of a new US-trained military force called the Guardia Nacional [National Guard].”

There were two bourgeois parties in the country, the Somocista Liberals and the tolerated opposition in the Conservative Party. Sometimes conflicts between these forces led to short-lived armed actions, but the National Guard ensured Somoza’s tight grip on power and much of the economy. In the late 1950s there were attempts at armed struggles against the regime. A young student leader, Carlos Fonseca, took part in one of these armed initiatives. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was having a profound impact throughout Latin America and Fonseca became a revolutionary socialist under the influence of the Revolution. He had first joined the Nicaraguan pro-Moscow party, but broke with the Stalinist conception that the anti-Somoza revolution had to be led by the nationalist bourgeoisie, and that revolutionists (and the workers and...
peasants) should therefore subordinate themselves to the bourgeois opposition.

Fonseca set out trying to duplicate the Cuban victory in his own country and in 1962 formed the FSLN as a guerrilla organization in the mountains of northern Nicaragua. Fonseca was the Front’s central leader and wrote its main programmatic document, which became known as the “Historic Program.” This program combined the struggle for national independence of Sandino with the lessons of the Cuban Revolution, recognizing that only the workers and peasants would lead a revolution that would not only overthrow the dictatorship, but open the way to a fundamental change in society in their interests.

The FSLN scored some victories and defeats in the coming years, mostly defeats. The National Guard killed and imprisoned many FSLN cadres, and at times the Front was reduced to a handful in Nicaragua with leaders in exile in Cuba or Costa Rica. In 1976, Fonseca himself was killed after he returned to Nicaragua from exile to join the guerrilla band. He and the FSLN had become well known in the country by this time as anti-Somoza fighters.

At the end of 1974, after a period of quiescence, the FSLN launched renewed armed struggle in the mountains. On Christmas Day the FSLN launched a spectacular action in the capital of Managua. They “broke the silence” by invading a diplomatic reception and seizing many leading figures in the regime. They freed their hostages only when Somoza agreed to free political prisoners and provide the fighters with safe passage out of the country.

In response, Somoza launched a ferocious crackdown.

As Zimmermann explains in her excellent book, Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution, “The government immediately declared a state of siege and launched a wave of repression that resulted in three thousand deaths. The first targets were radical students, workers, and Catholic activists in the cities, but the majority of victims were campesinos suspected of aiding the guerrillas. The massive counterinsurgency drive in the countryside that succeeded in killing Carlos Fonseca also involved dropping bombs and napalm on settlements, burning peasant homes and fields, and disappearances, rapes, and incarceration in concentration camps. As news of this terror reached the cities, the desire to rid the nation of Somoza acquired new urgency, especially among the lower classes...but also among middle-class Nicaraguans.”

The Somozas had not ruled exclusively by violence, Zimmermann notes. They “had generally been able to convince significant sections of the population of their right to rule, through a combination of power sharing [with the Conservatives], economic policies that
benefited the bourgeoisie as a whole, and populist appeals to workers. The repression of 1975 and 1976 seriously undermined the idea that Somoza had a moral right to govern Nicaragua or that he could continue to do so with any measure of stability. The increasing visibility of the FSLN, in spite of the repression, gave the bourgeois opposition yet another reason to hate Somoza. That government terror was spawning revolutionaries was as least as objectionable to them as Somoza's use of political power for unfair economic advantage.  

2 Somoza's moral authority had already begun to be compromised after a severe earthquake destroyed much of Managua in 1972. The corrupt regime pilfered away most of the relief received from abroad and failed to reconstruct the capital.

The FSLN had been divided since 1972 into three factions, under the pressure of the difficult situation they operated in. These factions became hardened after Fonseca's death. They called themselves the Prolonged People's War Tendency (GPP), the Proletarian Tendency (TP), and the Insurrectionary Tendency (TI—also called the Third Tendency or terceristas). These factions of the FSLN claimed allegiance to the same organization, and to the programmatic positions of Carlos Fonseca contained in the “Historic Program.” The discussions between the factions from 1972 to 1976 have largely been lost, and the differences remain somewhat murky. After 1976, the factions stopped discussing with each other.

However, some delineation can be made. The GPP, as its name implied, thought there would be a prolonged guerrilla struggle. This would be carried out in the countryside and eventually would become strong enough to surround the cities. This view was close to Maoist concepts. They stressed land reform, and worked only with students and intellectuals in the cities. The original central leaders of the GPP were killed in 1973, and then Henry Ruiz and Tomás Borge led this faction.

The TP agreed with the FSLN program that Nicaragua was a mainly agricultural society, but held that the peasantry had been proletarianized and needed unions more than land reform. They concentrated their work among the urban working-class communities. It was the only faction that never fielded its own rural guerrilla force. Their main leader was Jaime Wheelock.

The TI differed with the GPP in that it held that insurrection was not for a far-off future, but should be prepared in the current period. Its central leaders were Humberto and Daniel Ortega.

While he was alive, Fonseca criticized all three factions. Concerning the GPP he thought they were avoiding current struggles in the name of the “prolonged war.” He thought the TP counterposed the cities to the countryside, did not understand the need for land
reform that would include private peasant plots as well as collective agriculture where appropriate, and neglected the military struggle outside the big cities, where most Nicaraguans lived. He said the TI concentrated too much on armed actions to the detriment of political work.

All three tendencies were moving away from the Historic Program after Fonseca was killed. The TI carried this the furthest, envisioning an alliance with the bourgeois opposition whereby the FSLN would concentrate on the military struggle against the National Guard and the bourgeois opposition would dominate the post-Somoza government. The FSLN would be allowed some representation in the government. This went directly against the Historic Program, which viewed the exploited classes, the workers and peasants, as the driving force of the revolution, and who would take power under the leadership of the FSLN.

The harsh repression unleashed by Somoza led him to believe the FSLN was smashed, and he lifted the state of siege in September 1977. Indeed, 1977 was a dark year for the FSLN, but it survived. A women’s organization linked to the FSLN was formed, concentrating on campaigns for political prisoners. The TP made gains in organizing a union of agricultural workers.

In January 1978 the country’s best known bourgeois oppositionist, Pedro Chamorro, a leader of the Conservatives, was assassinated on his way to work at the La Prensa newspaper, known for its criticisms of Somoza. Protest demonstrations swept the country.

This was the beginning of a new wave of mass resistance to Somoza. As Zimmermann describes:

“New forms of popular struggle took shape, became generalized over the course of the next year, and came to symbolize the Nicaraguan insurrection: raging street bonfires of smelly rubber tires, homemade Molotov cocktails and contact bombs, and cobblestone barricades to protect poor neighborhoods from [National Guard] tanks. Hundreds and then thousands of walls sprouted revolutionary slogans, sometimes signed by the FSLN-GPP or FSLN-TP. In February 1978, an anti-Somoza uprising organized by none of the three tendencies erupted in the indigenous community of Monimbo, located in the city of Masaya, only twenty miles from Managua.

“In April a student strike closed Nicaragua’s universities and 80 percent of its public and private high schools. In July crowds of cheering supporters gathered in several cities to greet members of Los Doce (The Twelve), a San-José-based group of pro-FSLN businessmen, intellectuals, and religious leaders, organized by the
terceristas. The same month, popular Sandinista organizations, mostly influenced by the TP, coalesced to form the United People’s Movement....”

Then in August the TI organized a spectacular action that captured international attention, reminiscent of the 1974 raid. Disguised as guardsmen, two dozen guerrillas captured the National Palace in Managua, during a large gathering of Somoza supporters, holding hostage 3,500 politicians and businessmen until Somoza agreed to release all 59 FSLN political prisoners. Tens of thousands came out to cheer the freed prisoners as they passed through working-class neighborhoods on the way to the airport. At the end of the month 500 high school students supported by the population took control of the city of Matagalpa, fighting the National Guard for five days before the dictatorship retook control by sending in Special Forces units. The insurgents wore bandanas with the Sandinista colors of red and black, although there was not a single FSLN member in the city.

In September, the FSLN organized uprisings in six cities outside the capital. Somoza responded with aerial bombing and artillery. The TI had initiated the actions, but youth looking to all three tendencies took part in the fighting. The uprisings were crushed, and 50,000 people fled to Costa Rica, Honduras and El Salvador.

Caroline Lund and I were vacationing back from Paris in the United States, camping in New Hampshire, reading the reports in the newspapers and listening to Radio Havana on short wave. Caroline was so moved she wanted to go to Nicaragua to join the fighting. Of course, this was not practical, but indicated our excitement.

The SWP relied on reports from Carlos Fonseca’s half-brother, Fausto Amador, through October of 1978. While he did cover the events, he downplayed the key role of the FSLN. Given the animosity between the FSLN leaders and himself, this was to be expected, but our reliance on his reports blinded us to the full picture of what was happening with the FSLN.

Some of the Nicaraguans who fled after the September uprising came to the United States, seeking political asylum. Immigration authorities told them bluntly “only people from Communist countries get asylum.” The United States Committee for Justice to Latin American Political Prisoners (USLA), in which the SWP played a key role, launched a campaign demanding that these refugees be allowed to stay in the United States. On April 22, 1979, Norman Gonzalez and Selvia Nebbia from USLA were able to interview many of the detainees, who were being held under strict surveillance.
One of the detainees was Alfredo (last names weren’t used in case they got deported back to Nicaragua, where they would face prison or worse), who had been held for five months. He said he had been a member of the FSLN since he was twelve years old. In the September uprising, he lost his father and mother, his wife and his two children. He had to leave Nicaragua in a hurry, without his papers, and hitched-hiked to Mexico and then to the United States.

Growing numbers of Nicaraguans came to see the FSLN as their organization. In response, U.S. President Carter formed a commission of the Organization of American States (OAS) to go to Nicaragua to bolster the bourgeois opposition, fearing it would be bypassed by the Sandinistas. But the OAS failed to negotiate a transfer of power from Somoza to the opposition. Repression increased, which only fueled the people’s anger, and the ranks of the FSLN swelled. Armed clashes between FSLN guerrillas and the National Guard in the countryside increased. Strikes, demonstrations, land seizures, building occupations and attacks on the National Guard barracks mushroomed. Civil Defense Committees formed in many cities. Within a few months into 1979, a full-scale insurrection was underway.

The FSLN did not always initiate the actions, which grew spontaneously, but the fighters identified with the Front, wearing red and black kerchiefs. According to Zimmermann, “The tens of thousands of mostly young Nicaraguans who threw themselves into the fight against Somoza changed Nicaraguan politics, and they also changed the FSLN. The entry of these masses into action pushed the FSLN to the left, not only in terms of speeding up the war against Somoza but also in terms of the radicalization of the revolution’s goals. This pushed all three tendencies back toward Carlos Fonseca, toward his vision of a Sandinista revolution that would indicate a process of radical social transformation.”

This led to a reunification of the three tendencies in March 1979. They formed a National Directorate of nine members, three from each tendency: Daniel and Humberto Ortega and Víctor Tirado from the TI; Tomás Borge, Bayardo Arce and Henry Ruiz from the GPP; Jaime Wheelock, Luis Carrión and Carlos Núñez from the TP. The reunification removed some confusion among the masses and united them behind the FSLN.

On June 4 the National Directorate issued a call for an insurrectionary general strike. A few days later it launched a full-scale uprising in Managua. The National Guard was forced to abandon León and Matagalpa, the next two largest cities, and many small towns.
“A massive uprising of workers and peasants, opposed to the bloody dictatorship of Gen. Anastasio Somoza is sweeping Nicaragua,” wrote Suzanne Haig in *The Militant*. “Rebels from the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) control León, the second largest city, and a general strike has shut down Managua, the capital.”

According to FSLN reports, Haig noted, the Carter administration was sending direct military aid to support Somoza’s effort to defeat the revolt. As well, the U.S. backed regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador flew troops and war materials into Nicaragua with planes supplied by the United States. The rebels also announced the capture of a Guatemalan Army colonel, Oscar Ruben Castañeda, who was with Somoza’s National Guard in León.

Demonstrations were held in U.S. cities, which of course SWP and YSA members participated in, demanding the Carter administration keep “Hands Off Nicaragua.” The largest was in New York at the Nicaraguan Consulate, where a crowd of 500 demonstrated.

The urban insurrections Zimmermann notes were decidedly working class in character, as Fonseca had anticipated. According to almost all reports the uprisings were located in the urban slums. Consequently, Somoza bombed the working class neighborhoods in the cities, killing as many as 50,000 people. But as Zimmermann describes he could not defeat the fighters’ firm resolve. “The FSLN had to scramble to catch up with the uprisings,” she writes. “By the spring of 1979, committed and experienced FSLN cadres (who might have been in the organization only a few months) were leading the day-to-day activity of the revolution, distributing the limited number of weapons available, training milcianos, organizing community support, food supplies, and care of wounded, deciding when and where to strike and when to retreat, and in the process recruiting and training new leaders.”

Washington did all it could to prevent the Sandinistas from taking power, trying to put the bourgeois opposition in power instead. But the National Guard disintegrated in the face of the insurrection, Somoza fled to his imperialist masters in the United States, and on July 19 FSLN guerrilla columns marched into Managua, where they were greeted by cheering crowds underneath two large banners with the portraits of Sandino and Fonseca.

A new five-person coalition government was formed, with three Sandinistas and two bourgeois opposition figures, Violeta Chamorro, the widow of Pedro Chamorro, and industrialist Alfonso Robelo. But this was a figurehead government. The real power was in the hands of the FSLN National Directorate.
The Militant hailed the triumph of the workers and peasants as “a victory for working people throughout Latin America, in the United States and around the world.” We sent Militant and Intercontinental Press reporter Fred Murphy and SWP National Committee member Peter Camejo to Nicaragua to cover the events. In Paris, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, which Caroline Lund and I were members of, also issued a statement hailing the victory on July 4 and calling for an international campaign to defend the revolution. Around the world, supporters of the Fourth International threw themselves into this effort.

The new government immediately nationalized all the holdings of the Somoza clan in the cities and countryside. This was a major section of the economy, as the Somozas had utilized their dictatorial powers for decades to line their pockets. A new Nicaraguan Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) was formed, headed by Jaime Wheelock.

Fred Murphy reported for The Militant:

“Headed by a column of armed Sandinistas, more than 5,000 peasants and agricultural workers marched from Diramba to Jinotepe—two towns about 30 miles south of [Managua]—on July 29.

“More than twenty cooperatives of farmworkers from Carazo Province participated in the action, which was organized by the Field Workers Association (ATC). Their slogan was ‘the lands of the assassins belong to the peasants.’ According to an account published in the July 30 issue of the Sandinista daily Barricada, the peasants ‘expressed their firm decision to expropriate the land of the Somocistas and administer them in a collective way to strengthen the process of agrarian reform in the area.’ ....[the same issue reported that in León Provence] ‘peasant militias are already in formation, since the peasants themselves have asked to be armed to defend their production in blood and fire—a display of enthusiasm for joining a revolutionary process in which they will be the first to benefit.’”

Cuba immediately pledged aid and defense. Radio Havana, which previously said its was broadcasting from the “Free Territory of the Americas” now said it was coming from the “First Free Territory of the Americas.” At the July 26 mass meeting in honor of the initial blow struck by the Cuban revolutionists on that date in 1953, Sandinista leaders and even the bourgeois figure Robelo traveled to Cuba to participate and were greeted by a tremendous reception. (Robelo didn’t wear his usual business suit.)

Caroline and I came back from Paris to the United States to participate in the SWP convention held August 5-11 in Oberlin, Ohio. Peter Camejo and Fred Murphy arrived late from Nicaragua to the
convention. Peter addressed the full convention, and told the cheering crowd of some 1,550 that “the socialist revolution has begun in Nicaragua!”

After the convention Camejo wrote about the political and social measures initiated by the new government, which went beyond the nationalization of Somoza’s holdings and the beginning of the land reform:

“[The Sandinista government] has also nationalized all of Nicaragua’s banks. This gives it control over the vast bulk of the country’s industrial wealth.... The large number of buildings formerly owned by Somoza and the Somocistas will not be monopolized by private individuals or government administrators for personal use. Instead they are to be transformed into schools, child-care centers, sports centers, museums, and cultural centers.

“Government control has been established over all important exportable agricultural commodities, including cotton, coffee, sugar, and fish.... In the cities—especially in the working-class and poor districts—Sandinista Defense Committees are being formed on a block-by-block basis to oversee the distribution of food aid, organizing the reconstruction of housing and other buildings destroyed by Somoza’s bombings, and work with the Sandinista militias.

“Workers in the factories, stores, banks, and other workplaces are also forming committees. These are usually elected by assemblies of all the workers. They are to form the basis of a new United Federation of Sandinista Workers, which integrate the trade unions that existed under the dictatorship with the new workers committees. It is to include the agricultural proletariat as well....

“The revolution’s leaders have also announced some longer-range plans.... Chief among these is an ambitious campaign against illiteracy modeled on the example of what was done in Cuba after the 1959 revolution there. Some 60 percent of Nicaraguans do not know how to read and write.... Brigades of teachers—many of them high-school and college students—will soon begin being trained to carry out the literacy drive.”

In addition, plans were announced for the formation of a July 19 Sandinista Youth organization and a National Union of Nicaraguan Women.

Charles-André Udry, whom Caroline and I worked closely with in Paris, was among the over 200 international guests present at the convention. He stayed over, and at the end of August he and I along with Fred Halstead and others from the SWP and the Fourth International including Hugo Blanco went to Nicaragua. Charles-André was able to meet in private with a woman who was part of the
broader FSLN leadership and sympathetic to the Fourth International. She had secretly attended the 1974 World Congress.

Charles-André and I stood shoulder-to-shoulder witnessing a parade of the just-formed army on September 1. It was somewhat rag-tag, having been hastily organized from the FSLN guerrillas and the militias who formed during the insurrection. They didn’t all have the same arms as a regular army usually would have, but carried the weapons they had with them from the struggle. Included in the parade were a few captured National Guard tanks. We were impressed and greatly moved by the discipline and grim determination expressed on the faces of these young fighters, which included many women, as they passed by. They and the FSLN knew that their fight was not over—that Washington would swiftly organize to overthrow the revolution.

What we were witnessing were the first steps in the formation of a new armed power, the core of what could become a workers’ state. I realized that the situation fit the concept we in the SWP had developed of a workers and farmers government. The old state power had been smashed. The new government rested on the mobilization of the workers and peasants. With the nationalization of the Somoza properties, a big section of the economy, the regime had shown the capacity to move against the rights, privileges, and property of the capitalist class. A new dynamic had been unleashed. When I returned to the United States, I reported my conclusion, which the rest of the leadership had tentatively held, waiting my report.

Peter Camejo, along with his companion Gloria Najar, moved to Managua to set up a bureau there to follow the revolution. I went back to Nicaragua and helped Peter to lease a house that would contain an office for the bureau as well as living quarters. Over the next years, there were a number of people who functioned as our representatives in the bureau.

Caroline and I returned to Paris. The United Secretariat had to deal with the question of Fausto Amador, who had held a news conference in 1969 reported in the Somoza press denouncing the FSLN and urging his brother Fonseca to turn himself in and work for social change in the legal framework set up by Somoza. Since it was we in the Leninist Trotskyist Faction who had insisted that Fausto Amador be accepted as part of the International in the process of the dissolution of the factions, as explained in Chapter Twelve, I wrote a letter to Fausto on behalf of the United Secretariat. In this letter I explained that Fausto should repudiate his 1969 statements and express his willingness to return to Nicaragua and place himself under the discipline of the FSLN in order to join the revolutionary
process. Fausto rejected this proposal and he was subsequently expelled from the Fourth International.

We had another problem. Hugo Moreno had organized an armed detachment of his supporters called the Simon Bolivar Brigade from Columbia and some other countries to invade the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast during the insurrection. By and large the insurrection was confined to the Spanish-speaking majority areas of the country. The Atlantic coast communities were composed of English-speaking Blacks, descendants of slaves and workers brought there by the British in the 19th century, and indigenous dark-skinned people, including, importantly, the Miskito people, who spoke their own language.*

The Simon Bolivar Brigade tried to pass itself off as part of the FSLN, and set itself up as the government in sections of the Atlantic coast. Since the groups loyal to Moreno had been part of the Fourth International, we had to swiftly denounce this criminal adventure, and back the FSLN when it moved into the area to drive the Brigade out. The United Secretariat did so unanimously and publicly and also in person through Mexican and other comrades who had gone to Nicaragua to support the revolution. This adventure by the Morenistas echoed what they had done in the Portuguese revolution (see Chapter Nine). In both instances they tried to hijack a revolutionary process from the outside.

Notably, Peter Camejo in his memoir *North Star* makes a major error. In it he claims that Ernest Mandel and the majority of the Fourth International supported the Simon Bolivar Brigade. This assertion is false. Why Peter made this error is puzzling, since he publicly wrote the exact opposite at the time, when he was in Nicaragua.

The Council of State the FSLN had agreed to in a compromise with bourgeois opponents of Somoza before the insurrection had become obsolete with the victory. Fred Murphy wrote, “It was disproportionally weighted toward the most conservative sectors of the anti-Somoza front. Out of 33 representatives on the Council the FSLN would have had only six or perhaps a few more.” The government postponed the convening of the council until March 1980, and declared its composition would be changed to represent the “motor forces” of the revolution, the workers and peasants through their new organizations.

There were a few ultraleft groups that attacked the new government as bourgeois. These came from Maoist and Trotskyist backgrounds, although the latter did not represent and were opposed
to the positions of the Fourth International. In general, they would “up the ante” on programs launched by the workers and peasants government, claiming they were not going fast enough or far enough. Some of their demands, such as for the immediate convening of a constituent assembly, were in fact if not in intent counter-revolutionary, as they implied the overthrow of the revolutionary government. The facts on the ground created by the insurrection had bypassed such demands.

The FSLN initially lumped these ultraleft groups with the remnants of the Somocistas and sought to repress them. This was an error, as the ultralefts had to be dealt with politically, through argument and discussion. The FSLN soon moved to correct this error. Tomás Borge said there were “honest people” in the ultras left groups and the FSLN should open a dialogue with them. “Jail is not the best place for a dialogue,” he pointed out in a speech. (Fred Murphy and Peter Camejo wrote a reasoned and pedagogical article on this subject that appeared in the November 16, 1979 issue of The Militant.)

Carlos Fonseca had been buried by the National Guard in the rural village of Waslala after they killed him. On November 5, his remains were brought to Matagalpa, where he was born. Some 30,000 to 50,000 people rallied in his honor there, including a contingent of volunteer doctors from Cuba. His coffin was carried through a series of villages on its way to Managua.

As Fred Murphy reported:

“More than 100,000 people poured into the streets [of Managua] on November 7 in a massive show of support for the gains of the revolution and to honor Carlos Fonseca Amador, founder of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. The demonstration and rally were the largest since the mobilization July 20 that greeted the FSLN fighters as they marched into Managua. The outpouring occurred against the background of border violations and harassment of Nicaraguan diplomatic officials by the rightist military dictatorship in Honduras. The Honduran government openly collaborates with officers of Somoza’s National Guard who retreated into Honduras with their troops following the July insurrection....

“Interior Minister Tomás Borge addressed the rally and denounced these hostile acts. ‘Pointing to the ominous character of these actions, Borge... [said] ‘Could it be that this provocation by elements linked to the Honduran police and is part of a plan whose scope and content we are not yet fully aware?’ [Indeed, they were part of the plan hatched in Washington to unleash the murderous
‘Contra’ war against Nicaragua that caused massive damage and casualties in the years to come.”

In the three-day celebration from Matagalpa to Managua, Murphy further noted:

“The determination and spirit of commitment to the revolution that permeated these mobilizations was summed up by the quotation from Fonseca Amador repeated over and over through these three days and displayed on the front page of the Sandinista daily *Barricada* November 8: ‘It is not simply a question of changing the men in power, but rather of changing the system, of overthrowing the exploiting classes and bringing the exploited classes to victory.’”

Peter Camejo wrote an article in *The Militant* December 21, detailing the resistance being waged by those capitalists who hadn’t fled against the revolution, including economic sabotage, as 1979 drew to a close.

***

In the autumn of 1979 we began to take notice of a revolution that had occurred earlier in the year in the tiny Caribbean island nation of Grenada. Ernest Harsch went to Grenada for *Intercontinental Press*, where he reported: “Eight months after the March 13 insurrection that brought the New Jewel Movement (NJM) to power in this small eastern Caribbean island, support for the new government is widespread. If anything, it may even be deepening among the poorest layers of this impoverished country, as the People’s Revolutionary Government (PRG) of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop drives ahead with a series of progressive measures aimed at improving the social position and living conditions of the vast majority of Grenada’s 110,000 people—the workers and small farmers.

“While some sectors of Grenadan society—the conservative and wealthy—are reacting with concern, the general verdict among young people, workers, and the unemployed is that the government deserves support and that it appears committed to transforming society on their behalf.”

The Grenadian population is overwhelmingly Black, descendants of slaves brought by the British to their former colony. Maurice Bishop spoke in Harlem to a crowd of 1,200, a fact that brought to our attention that something significant was happening on the island that could speak directly to U.S. African Americans.

Cuba hailed the “Three Giants” rising up in the Caribbean—Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada. It seemed to us that these interrelated revolutions were harbingers of a new period, posing new opportunities and new tasks for us.
* For more information about the formation of what became Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast, see Clifford D. Conner, Colonel Despard: The Life and Times of an Anglo-Irish Rebel (Combined Publishing, 2000).

2 Ibid., pp. 210-211.
3 Ibid., p. 212.
9 Ibid., Nov. 9, 1979.
10 Ibid., Nov. 16, 1979.
11 Ibid., Nov. 30, 1979.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: WAR IN NICARAGUA

The new workers’ and peasants’ government that came to power in July 1979 as a result of the insurrectionary overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship faced enormous problems. Nicaragua was one of the poorest countries in Latin America.

Reporting from Managua for The Militant, Anibal Yanez wrote:

“The Nicaraguan workers and peasants, led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), are entering a new phase of their struggle. During the last weeks of 1979, the Sandinistas took further steps, including important changes in the government, to defend, deepen and consolidate the revolution.

“As Commander of the Revolution Víctor Manuel Tirado López explained during a public meeting in Managua on December 27, the main goals of the revolutionary government for 1980 are the literary crusade and planning for economic reconstruction.... The vast majority of Nicaraguans have lived in poverty. This is the result of the voracious capitalist system maintained by Somoza and his U.S. imperialist backers. The situation was worsened by the dictator's deliberate destruction of the country's industry during the war of liberation and the accompanying disruption of the planting season. Today, unemployment, hunger, disease, and child malnutrition are among the tremendous problems that the Sandinista government must begin to solve if the revolution is to march forward.

“Its proposed solution is the 1980 Plan for Economic Reactivation. According to Tirado, this plan is aimed at benefiting 'mainly the poorest, most backward sectors of the population, those who have always had to bear the weight of the crisis, of social or natural catastrophes. It is not a question...of only raising production, but at the same time of distributing it in a just way, to progressively close the social chasms that the Somozaist regime deepened every day,' Tirado explained.

“The plan will place emphasis on reactivating the production of basic goods such as food, clothing, shoes, and medicine. It also projects creating 90,000 jobs to help reduce unemployment and underemployment; raising the minimum wage; and protecting the real wages of the poorest sectors through government-supplied basic goods, price controls, and state spending on education, health and social welfare.”
Important changes were made to the government. The FSLN forced the cabinet to resign, and announced a thoroughgoing reorganization. Roberto Mayorga, a bourgeois technocrat, was removed as minister of planning, and FSLN Commander of the Revolution Henry Ruiz replaced him. Bernardino Larios, a former officer of the Somoza National Guard who had defected from the dictator, was replaced as minister of defense by Humberto Ortega, commander in chief of the new Sandinista People’s Army.

Capitalists still held important sections of the economy, especially in big agriculture. Ruiz warned them that if the private sector “takes a wait and see attitude” with regard to reactivating production, “the revolution will take measures, and here the unproductive latifundio will disappear. If the private enterprise does not understand that the secret of harmony consists of all of us working for the benefit of the people, they will have made an enormous mistake.”

Commander of the Revolution Jaime Wheelock replaced an anti-Somoza landowner as head of the ministry of agricultural development. Agricultural production, primarily cotton and coffee, made up 56 percent of Nicaragua’s exports in 1978.

The bourgeoisie, organized into the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), attacked these measures in a statement printed in the anti-Somoza bourgeois newspaper, La Prensa. COSEP demanded that the Sandinistas abandon their policy of placing the interests of the workers and peasants in the forefront, and instead promote “private enterprise.” The new Sandinista Workers Federation (CST) roundly denounced them in the pages of Barricada, the FSLN newspaper. The CST incorporated some of the older unions under the former regime and was busy organizing workers in new unions. The CST called COSEP the “traitorous bourgeoisie” and warned that the only way they could be part of the political process was to join in the economic reactivation effort. The revolutionary process must go forward, the CST said, “until it culminates in the victory of the working class.” Other mass organizations were growing, including a new women’s federation and the Sandinista Defense Committees. The latter worked at the local level overseeing distribution of food and services.

The victory in Nicaragua gave an impetus to revolutionary forces in other Central American countries, especially in El Salvador. A number of groups had been fighting the military rulers of that country. In early January, they began a process of cooperation, which culminated some months later with the formation of the Faribundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Matilde Zimmermann, the SWP candidate for vice president, together with four SWP senatorial candidates, visited Nicaragua in
February to learn firsthand about the revolution. Defense of the revolution was a central aspect of our election campaigns in 1980.

Peter Camejo and Gloria Najar, who were part of our bureau in Managua, visited a mine 160 miles northeast of the capital. They wrote:

“The Neptune mine in Bananza is a big one, producing several different metals. In 1976 it produced 23,340 ounces of gold, along with 15,796 tons of zinc, 696 tons of copper, 1,393 tons of lead, and 94,634 ounces of silver. Neptune had been owned by the big U.S. mining company, ASARCO, until it, along with all other Nicaraguan mines was nationalized in early November [1979] by the revolutionary government.... Wages at Neptune averaged only twenty-eight dollars per week for its 1,022 employees. (The figure for most workers was even lower when one accounts for the high salaries paid to the Canadian and U.S. managers; these range as high as $45,000 per year.)....

“But low wages tell only part of the story of extreme exploitation that has been carried out by the North American mining corporations in their effort to drain out every dollar possible from Nicaragua. Traditionally, only Misquito Indians have been given jobs as miners. In this manner the corporations kept the local population divided between mill workers and miners, always reserving the hardest and lowest-paid jobs for the Misquito. The local unit of the Somoza’s National Guard was paid for and run by the mining company itself.

“Unions never existed in these mines until October 1979, after the triumph of the revolution that overthrew Somoza. An organizing effort some twenty-five years ago was crushed. Ernesto Povedo Rodriguez, a leader of the new Revolutionary Miners Workers Union...described to us the conditions miners suffered before the revolution: ‘We had no protection, anyone could be fired at any time. If you tried to protest, the National Guard...would arrest you. We had no coffee breaks. No real retirement plan. A weak social security program was started in 1967, which provided for pensions from 140 to 250 cordobas ($14 to $25) per month. But it often would not be paid. You needed documents to apply, and many Misquitos have no papers.... If a miner died in an accident, they would give the widow 2,000 cordobas ($200)—in a pile of small bills to make it look like a lot of money. If you lost an eye, leg, or hand, you got nothing; you were fired.’”

Peter and Gloria went down the mine, and saw that there was no ventilation, no place to eat, and no lighting other than the miners’ headlamps. Eighty five percent of the miners suffered from silicosis.
With the nationalization of the mine and the new union giving voice to the workers, these conditions began to change for the better.

In the next months and years, many SWP members visited Nicaragua and wrote articles, in addition to those who did stints living in the party apartment in Managua as part of The Militant's bureau.

***

On February 22, 1980, the government brought charges against a Stalinist group, the People's Action Movement (PAM). Among other charges, the group was found to have been organizing its own clandestine armed wing, in violation of a law prohibiting such formations outside of the mass militias being organized. This group was opposed to the revolutionary government, and having its own armed wing may have implied it was keeping open the possibility of moving against it at some point. The main danger the revolution faced was continued attacks by armed Somocista groups against Sandinista mass organizations and projects. Against these attacks the FSLN outlawed any armed groups not under the control of the revolution. Having armed units of organizations such as the PAM cut across the defense of the revolution and got in the way of disarming the Somocistas. After the government confronted them, the PAM agreed to disband its armed units. The charges against it were dropped and the disruption activities of this group ceased.

One target of the counterrevolution were the 70,000 young people mobilized to fan out over the country in a great literacy campaign to teach basic reading and writing skills to 900,000 people, one half of the entire population over 10 years of age. Some of these selfless young people were murdered.

Lorraine Thiebaud wrote in The Militant:

“Celebrating International Women's Day for the first time in a country free from tyranny, thousands of Nicaraguan women marched through the streets of Managua March 9. The demonstration was the culmination of a week of activities. Women of all ages came from every corner of Nicaragua and marched in provisional contingents, frequently led by all-women militia units. With raised fists they entered the Plaza of the Workers, shouting the main slogan of the women’s movement here—'Building a new country, we build the new woman!'. Special emphasis during the week’s events was placed on the upcoming literacy campaign, which has such fundamental significance in improving the lives of Nicaraguan women. More than 60 percent of urban women and 90 percent of rural women can neither read nor write their own names. Illiterate women in every city and town organized meetings to honor
the mothers of the teenaged men and women who will live in the
countryside for six months."^4

The successful completion of the literacy campaign was a major
achievement of the revolution's first year.

But capitalist sabotage continued. Fred Murphy reported from
Managua:

"In an impressive display of the growing strength of the FSLN-led
mass organizations in Nicaragua, more than 30,000 peasants and
agricultural laborers from across the country marched and rallied
here February 17. [The Rural Workers Association (ATC) organized
the march.] At the rally in the Plaza of the Revolution, ATC general
secretary Eduardo Garcia explained...we demand that the lands
intervened by INRA [National Institute of Agrarian Reform] that
could not be confiscated now pass over to the People's Property
Sector and that not a single inch of land be returned to the big
owners.

"Garcia was referring to the growing number of big farms that
have been placed under INRA administration owing to the refusal of
their private owners to put them into production or to meet the new
government's standards on wages, working conditions, and social
benefits for farm laborers. Other demands included in the ATC's Plan
of Struggle include a total revision of the old regime's Labor
Code...with the participation of the ATC and the trade unions; a halt
to firings and harassment of ATC organizers on private estates;
greater participation by farm workers in the administration of
INRA's state farms with full knowledge and discussion of production
plans, income, and expenses; and further improvements in food,
housing, health care, and education on both state and private
farms."^6

In one example, Thiebaud described how union members at El
Caracol Industries, a food-processing factory, took over their plant in
February 1980, but kept up full production. The unionists prohibited
owners Magelda and Oscar Campos from entering the factory. They
also demanded the government investigate their charge that the
Campos family was trying to bankrupt the company by reducing
production and decapitalizing.

"When I visited El Caracol," wrote Thiebaud, "the workers
displayed storerooms and warehouses which have been kept almost
empty of raw materials in recent months, well below the minimum
required to keep up the productive pace. Ten delivery trucks had
been idled because the owners would not buy repair parts. Many of
the machines in the factory now run only because the workers
themselves have found ways to fix them."^6
On March 2, 1980, the government issued a strong decree against capitalist sabotage, including removing “from the country the fixed or circulating assets of enterprises (that is, the capital of such enterprises). Violators of the new decree face the penalty of intervention of their enterprises (that is, putting them under state administration) plus fines of up to three times the value of the capital removed from Nicaragua. Individuals convicted under the decree may be jailed for one to three years.” It should be noted that intervention was not expropriation—the capitalists would remain owners, accruing profit, but would not run intervened enterprises.

“The experience at El Caracol Industries is clear,” the decree noted, “the owners have been aiming to clear out and take huge profits. Will the revolutionary government permit such actions? Will the workers permit the destruction of their source of employment? El Caracol Industries; Nicatex; Hurtado Cannery in Granada; Lacayo Supermarket, also in Granada—these mark the beginning of an anti-patriotic campaign that can only be halted by direct control over production by the workers and due attention by the state to such problems. Can we reactivate our economy with historical characters like the anti-patriotic businessmen? Obviously not.”

The struggle in neighboring El Salvador against the military junta was also heating up. When the dictatorship murdered Archbishop Óscar Romero, who had taken the side of the El Salvadoran people, there was a big demonstration of protest in Managua in solidarity. Another big demonstration welcomed Grenadian Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. These expressions of internationalism were matched by enthusiasm in thanking Cuban doctors and other workers helping Nicaragua to rebuild.

Nancy Cole reported for The Militant:

“The Sandinista-led government of Nicaragua has taken another step toward establishing the right of the workers and peasants to a decisive say in how their country is run. On April 21, the government junta announced that a majority of delegates to the Council of State set to convene May 4 will represent the mass organizations. This altered the original balance weighted heavily in favor of capitalist forces....

“The restructured council will still provide seats to the capitalist organizations and parties that were originally included. But it has been expanded.... Nine of the council’s members are to be chosen on a regional basis by the Sandinista Defense Committees. Eight will come from Nicaragua’s five trade union federations, including three representatives from the Sandinista Workers Federation. Three delegates will represent the Rural Workers Association and one each will be chosen from the teachers union, health workers union, and
journalists union. The Association of Nicaraguan Women and the July 19 Sandinista Youth will each have a delegate. And for the first time on any Nicaraguan government body, the Indian minorities of the Atlantic Coast region will be represented with one delegate. The FSLN will have six representatives, and six other smaller [leftist] political parties will have one delegate each."

Even though the Sandinista Workers Federation was growing rapidly, it had only three of the eight spots reserved for the union federations. Two delegates were allotted to the Independent General Workers Federation, led by the pro-Moscow Nicaraguan Socialist Party and based primarily among construction workers; one representative to the Confederation of Trade Union Action, led by the ultra-left Stalinist Communist Party and based mainly among Managua textile workers; one to the Confederation of Trade Union Unification tied to the U.S. AFL-CIO; and one to the Confederation of Nicaraguan Workers controlled by an anti-communist Christian Democratic current.

The three capitalist parties had one delegate each, as did the six organizations of industrialists, landlords, merchants and big farmers making up COSEP. The capitalists raised a howl at being put in the minority. Two of the original five-member ruling junta (the other three were FSLN), Alfonso Robelo and Violeta Chamorro, resigned in protest. The U.S. press also screamed against this “totalitarian” takeover by the representatives of the great majority.

Robelo and COSEP launched a campaign of anticommunist demagoguery in the capitalist press, especially in La Prensa, which was increasingly the voice of the bourgeoisie. After a young 

"brigadista" in the literacy campaign was murdered, there was a big demonstration of protest in Managua. FSLN leader Tomás Borge spoke, and outlined steps to fight the growing counterrevolution. One was to counter the anticommunist demagoguery. The political work and vigilance of the Sandinista Defense Committees in each neighborhood would be stepped up. There would be a major push to organize militias in the cities and countryside. Borge listed 32 Somozaist encampments in Honduras along the border, and said defenses along the border would be stepped up.

Behind the scenes, Washington was arming and organizing the counterrevolutionary groups in Honduras. Later referred to as the “contras,” these groups were forming an army to carry out forays into Nicaragua, which would develop into a major counterrevolutionary war in the following years. The United States also stepped up arming the military junta in El Salvador in its war against the growing guerilla movement, including sending “advisors.” As well, the
dictatorships in Honduras and Guatemala received increased imperialist aid.

Plots for armed actions organized by capitalist forces in Nicaragua were discovered and broken up. One of these was led by Col. Bernardino Larios, the first defense minister of the new government after the overthrow of Somoza. Another plot consisted of the formation of nine squads of 25 men each to assassinate the nine FSLN commanders, who held ultimate power. The unmasking of one plot led to a shootout that resulted in the death of the main conspirator, Jorge Salazar, a coffee plantation owner. *La Prensa* hailed him as a “hero” and COSEP denounced his death as a “political crime,” notwithstanding that the facts of his arsenal of guns and money were exposed. On November 19, 1980, there was a rally of 100,000 workers and peasants in Managua denouncing these counterrevolutionary crimes.

“Open class conflict affects every aspect of daily life,” Matilde Zimmermann wrote about the situation developing in the country. She pointed to the conflict of ideas between the bourgeois press, especially *La Prensa* and those of the workers’ organizations including the FSLN’s Barricada. Counter rallies were another expression. From Managua, Zimmermann and Arnold Weissberg reported, “An estimated half million Nicaraguans shouted their approval of stiff new laws establishing greater government control over the economy at a rally here July 19. The demonstration marked the second anniversary of the Nicaraguan revolution as well as the twentieth of the founding of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The new laws were adopted in response to a series of demonstrations by the trade unions and other mass organizations. They make it easier for the government to halt ‘decapitalization’ (removal of capital from the country by industrialists and wealthy farmers). The new laws will also make more land available to landless peasants.”

A deep recession in the United States was hitting Central America hard. Austerity measures that made the workers and peasants pay for the crisis were the norm for the region. Nicaragua also was forced to take such measures, but these were different from those of the other Central American countries.

Zimmermann wrote:

“On September 10, the Government of National Reconstruction [as it was now named] invoked a ‘state of economic and social emergency,’ during which various activities are banned, such as price speculation and hoarding, the publication of false information designed to generate economic panic, the sabotage of production,
illegal strikes and land occupations outside the framework of the agrarian reform law.

“A series of austerity measures were announced, including a 5 percent cut in the current budget, a freeze on hiring in the state agencies, and a 10 percent cut in certain government subsidies. Not affected are subsidies for milk (which costs thirty [US] cents a liter), public transportation (ten cents a ride) or any of the basic foodstuffs sold below cost because of government price support. Nor will gas, water, or electricity rates be allowed to rise.

“Three new laws are designed to tighten control over the economy and save or generate foreign exchange. One imposes stiff penalties for various types of business—tax evasion, double bookkeeping, corruption. The second raises import taxes on several categories of luxury goods manufactured outside Central America. A third decree has temporarily closed the so-called parallel market, that is, the buying and selling of U.S. dollars on the street at more than the official rate of exchange. The parallel market will be allowed to reopen in a few weeks, but only in authorized offices and under tight control by the central banks. The uncontrolled parallel market has contributed to decapitalization or capital flight, by giving the rich a way to obtain dollars they can stash in foreign bank accounts.”

The worsening economic situation came in the context of the intensifying U.S.-backed contra war. A month-long mobilization of the army and militias as well as of the trade unions was launched October 3 to counter U.S.-Honduran naval maneuvers taking place just off the Nicaraguan coast. The war against the contras began to eat into the economy. Four top capitalists, leaders of COSEP, were arrested October 21 for violations of the September 9 decrees. Nevertheless, the revolution continued to make progress in rebuilding the devastated country.

Some years later, in 1985-1986, the FSLN acknowledged it had made two serious errors in the first years of the revolution. One was its emphasis on state farms and cooperatives in the agrarian reform, to the detriment of providing land to the landless peasants. In part this was to avoid the nationalization of the large capitalist farms, in what turned out to be a vain hope of winning the support of these farmers. While there was participation in production by the capitalist farmers, it was grudging, and was accompanied by behind-the-scenes decapitalization.

More important, the failure to carry through a sweeping land reform including a massive program to provide land to all peasants who wanted individual farms played into the contras’ propaganda. In particular, peasants in the north, along the border with Honduras, who had their own farms since the days of the Somoza dynasty, were
told that the Sandinistas wanted to take away their land and force them into state farms. Peasants in the north had been a source of troops for the Somoza National Guard, and now began to provide some mass support for the contras.

Of course, if the Sandinistas had nationalized the capitalist farms early on to carry through a far-reaching agrarian reform that included land to the peasants, such as was carried out in the Russian and Cuban revolutions, that would have meant a major showdown with the capitalist class, which the FSLN leaders were trying to avoid. But I believe that if they had taken this step early on, it would have put the revolution on a firmer footing economically, politically and militarily. Of course it would have also infuriated the U.S.-backed counter-revolution, but that happened in any case.

The second big error the Sandinistas later pointed to was their high-handed treatment of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast. These included Indians, mainly Miskitos, and English-speaking Blacks, descendents of slaves brought there by the British. The Atlantic Coast was geographically and linguistically separated from the Spanish-speaking majority. The revolution bypassed this important part of the country. The Sandinistas sent in Spanish speakers to take control of these areas, and, although they brought in some reforms, were resented. The result was the Atlantic Coast became another source for a mass base for the contras.

It should be noted that these two errors were in contradiction to the FSLN’s “Historic Program” written by FSLN founding leader Carlos Fonseca. That program called for land to the peasants and for self-determination for the Atlantic Coast, both key democratic demands.

We, along with the rest of the movement in solidarity with the Central American revolutions did not take notice of these errors at the time. Weissberg did note that in late 1981 and early 1982 there had been “a virtual invasion” of the northern part of the Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast by counterrevolutionary terrorists operating out of Honduras. To generate support in the coastal area, former Miskito leader turned contra, Steadman Fagoth, claimed his goal was establishment of a Miskito state. These contra forces operated at least one base within Nicaragua.¹⁰

We continued to maintain that the contras consisted only of U.S.-paid mercenaries. Washington was the force behind the contras, to be sure, and they wouldn’t have existed without its financial and military backing. But they were also gaining something of a mass base inside the country. The war drained scarce resources and inflicted heavy casualties among the most selfless and devoted cadres as it dragged on for the next several years.
One of the reporters in our Managua Bureau was Jose Perez. Like Mike Bauman and Jane Harris who had preceded Jose in the assignment, he came into conflict with the party leadership in New York. Years later he wrote to me about the “consistent difference with how The Militant presented the situation in Nicaragua, which was to hail every real and even imagined step forward no matter how slight as world historic while depicting the difficulties, contradictions and above all the toll being exacted by the war in the faintest pastels.” The leadership in New York thought it knew better what was happening in Nicaragua than the people on the ground.

Under the pressure of the war, a leading Sandinista, Eden Pastora, the former defense minister for Nicaragua, broke with the revolution at a press conference April 15, 1982 in Costa Rica. “Now Washington has a new and ‘attractive’ ally in its campaign to draw the noose more tightly around the Nicaraguan revolution,” wrote Will Reissner for The Militant. “What makes Pastora so valuable to Washington is that he was an active participant in the struggle...that overthrew the hated dictator Anastasio Somoza in July 1979.... Since his break with the FSLN, Pastora has traveled to Western Europe to try to win social-democratic parties there to his anti-Sandinista positions. He is reportedly planning a trip to Washington to meet with liberals in Congress. Pastora has also been the subject of sympathetic articles in leading U.S. newspapers.”

Despite the pressures the revolution was facing, both politically and militarily, there was considerable public sympathy for the Sandinista cause in the United States and internationally. On June 12, 1982, nearly one million people rallied in New York’s Central Park for peace and nuclear disarmament. Contingents calling for the United States to get out of Central America were well received.

In 1981, the ATC broke into two organizations with the formation of UNAG (National Union of Farmers and Ranchers). The latter became the organization of small peasants.

A pro-Sandinista academic, Ilja A. Luciak, who favored the policy of “national unity”—that is, “unity” with the capitalist farmers—wrote:

“Until 1983 UNAG organized the peasantry around an agrarian reform, centered on building agricultural cooperatives.... The bias against big producers [sic] was mainly a function of the view of former ATC cadres, who had joined UNAG in 1981 when the rural workers movement broke apart. These officials belonged to the rural proletariat and shared a history of struggle against the agrarian bourgeoisie. Having suffered years of exploitation at the hands of
rich landowners, they perceived any farmer with a sizeable landholding as the class enemy.... Wilberto Lara, UNAG’s second president (1982-1984), represented a good example of someone holding this position. A committed revolutionary, he could not transcend his proletarian background. During his tenure, UNAG was scorned by even those members of the rural bourgeoisie who, though open to the changes brought about by the revolution, rejected UNAG leadership’s antibourgeois rhetoric. This class bias, in many cases unwarranted, limited the development of the revolutionary process. Large landowners, crucial to a viable alliance between FSLN and the bourgeoisie under the policy of national unity, felt alienated, and many turned against the Sandinista revolution.

“In an effort to reinvigorate the policy of national unity in Nicaragua’s rural sector, the UNAG leadership began a discussion in October 1983 concerning the active recruitment of ‘influential producers.’ This important redirection of policy that ended the exclusion of the agrarian bourgeoisie was consolidated with the election of a new leader [Daniel Nunez].... Nunez ushered in a new era, beginning UNAG’s rise to become the mostly important Sandinista grassroots movement. The second major development...was the participation of large producers in the July 1984 assembly. Whereas the recruitment of the [capitalist farmers] was essential from the perspective of forging national unity, UNAG’s focus on the recruitment of rich peasants was not without consequences. Most significantly [they] came to dominate the decision-making structures of UNAG....

“Further, it has been argued...that the incorporation of the [capitalist farmers] strengthened their political power in the comarca, the rural hamlets of their origin, vis-à-vis the poor peasantry. This reality was in conflict with the Sandinista goal of strengthening grassroots democracy and resurrected power structures from the days of the Somoza regime ....”12

This shift marked the erosion of the workers and peasants government. The Sandinista government began to turn its face toward accommodating the key sector of the capitalist class, the agricultural bourgeoisie. Accelerating this process was the big blow of the overthrow of the Grenadian revolution in October 1983. This negatively affected the revolutionary morale of a sector of the Nicaraguan masses.

Another weight holding back the revolution was the failure of the Soviet Union to provide adequate military aid while the United States was pouring tens of millions into the contra forces.

It was in 1983 that I raised at a meeting of the SWP National Committee the question of the length of time since the revolution
without a decisive blow being struck against the still-dominant economic power of the capitalist class. Our view of workers and farmers governments was that they were highly unstable, and either had to go forward with the establishment of a full workers’ state through the expropriation of the bourgeoisie in a relatively short time, or they would be rolled back and a capitalist state re-stabilized. I raised this as a question, not for a vote.

In the summer of 1983, at a party national educational conference, Mary-Alice Waters gave a talk on the workers and farmers government where she appeared to answer me by revising our former conception. The new view she put forth was that the workers and farmers government was the first stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a workers state. This implied that a workers state had already been achieved in Nicaragua, so the delay in the expropriation of the capitalists was of no great matter. She later developed this new concept in a written article in the New International in 1984. By this time Jack Barnes had begun to equate the concept of “workers and peasants government” with Lenin’s pre-1917 idea of a “democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants” as the likely outcome of the future Russian Revolution. Waters’ speech did not address the question of whether Lenin’s formulation amounted to the first stage of a workers’ state, a concept which Lenin explicitly rejected.

This new concept of “workers and peasants government” was thus a muddle. In the course of the slow decline of the Nicaraguan revolution in the next years under the blows of the imperialist offensive, the majority leadership quietly dropped the concept, and rejected that a workers’ state had been established in Nicaragua.

In Nicaragua new elections were held in November 1984. The new government which took power in January 1985 was no longer a workers and peasants government, but a coalition government with the capitalist class. Much later, in July 1989 (after I had left the SWP), the National Committee adopted a resolution that observed, “By the time the newly elected Nicaraguan government took office in early 1985, those leaders of the revolution least attracted to a socialist course had become dominant in the government’s executive branch and the FSLN leadership.” Nevertheless, the National Committee maintained in 1989 that a workers and peasants government still existed. This was given the lie the following year when openly bourgeois forces swept the FSLN from power like so much ash in a bourgeois-style election.

Looking back on his experience in Nicaragua, Jose Perez wrote:

“Beginning in 1984 or so, as the war deepened, throwing the country into a deep economic and social crisis, the contra’s social
base grew to encompass a big fraction of the peasantry of the ‘agricultural frontier.’ They also had significant support in the major cities and towns of the agricultural zones, as was evident from their attack on Ocotal in mid-1984, which they overran and occupied briefly, something they were able to do even though there was a big government military base on the opposite side of the highway from the town with the aid of supporters inside the town.

“The resentment of the peasants towards the revolution came from a couple of sources. One was the FSLN took apart the traditional financial networks in the countryside after taking power, but was unable to effectively replace them. The state established a monopoly in basic grains, buying from the peasants at fixed prices, but at the same time it made a decision to finance the war by printing money, which made inflation unstoppable. This meant that the countryside was subsidizing the FSLN’s social programs in the cities, and getting ruined economically, making it dependent on state credits and handouts, which many hated.

“Nor were the peasants getting as much back in terms of social change as you might imagine. The agrarian reform prioritized collectivization, state farms and cooperatives in which people worked the land together. This was something which peasants in this agricultural frontier were slow to warm to, to say the least. Even many who joined cooperatives would have preferred to work individually. Yet in the four years I lived in Nicaragua, I did not meet a single peasant who had ever received an individual plot of land and title to work it on his own from the revolution....

“The social advances that the revolution had initially brought were largely or completely reversed by 1986 or 1987, or had been dwarfed by the crisis. Most of the rural schools had closed because they did not have teachers. The hospitals were in terrible shape, medical posts had been closed or abandoned, the rationing system had broken down and Sandinista Defense Committees and other mass organizations had largely ceased to function, or soon would. The big majority of the population was pushed into a grinding, demoralizing day-to-day struggle for existence....

“Tied into all this was a process of bureaucratization of the revolution, both the use of administrative methods instead of political methods and the granting or taking of privileges that while, in many cases small, rubbed salt in the wounds of a population being suffocated by an incredible economic crisis.”

Because of their social base, the contras could not be militarily defeated by the FSLN. Finally, the FSLN signed a peace agreement with them in 1987. This was facilitated by changes in the contra leadership, where the original leaders who came from the Somocista
National Guard were replaced. The accord reflected the military situation on the ground. Perez reports, “The National Resistance [the contras’ official name] was allowed to concentrate its forces in certain areas and remained armed pending the holding of elections, which were moved up from the end of 1990 to the beginning of the year. Press censorship and other similar measures were lifted; and it was stipulated that after the elections, the former members of the National Resistance would receive individual plots of land to farm if they wanted them.”

The mistakes of the FSLN were important. But I agree with Perez that the “main cause of the defeat of the revolution was the pressure of imperialism, the revolution was beat to a bloody pulp by the contra war.” It was the colossus to the north, which bore down on the small, poor country in a campaign of mass murder and economic strangulation that finally crushed this valiant and heroic people. But like the Paris Communards, they and the FSLN will be remembered and cherished in spite of their defeat for their powerful example.

* Rightist violence also flared in El Salvador. Thugs allied with the government murdered five leaders of the revolutionary forces. Four American women, three Catholic nuns and a missionary, were also murdered on their way to attend the funeral of the slain FDR [Revolutionary Democratic Front—soon to become the FMLN] leaders. “The bodies of Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan were found buried in a common grave near the village of San Juan Nonualco, twenty-five miles east of San Salvador,” wrote Fred Murphy in a Dec. 19, 1980 report for The Militant from Managua. “All had been tortured and shot in the neck.... Members of the Canadian delegation to the FDR funeral reported that they last saw the American women when the latter’s car was halted at a
National Guard roadblock. The roadblock site was not far from the area where the bodies and the burned-out remains of the vehicle were later discovered.” These nuns were selflessly devoted to helping the poor. They were part of a movement within the Catholic Church in Latin America at the time known as “liberation theology.” This movement was later denounced as pro-Marxist and disbanded by Pope John Paul II.

When the nuns’ disappearance became known on December 3, Washington was embarrassed, and tried to distance itself from the crime. But U.S. backing of the rightist dictatorship soon was back to normal.

On May 3, 1981, there was a demonstration in Washington, D.C., demanding the United States get out of El Salvador. Various anti-war groups, and the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) organized the march.


2 *Barricada* (newspaper of the FSLN), December 30, 1979.
Translation by *The Militant*.
5 Ibid., March 14, 1980.
6 Ibid., March 28, 1980.
7 Ibid., May 9, 1980.
8 Ibid., July 24 and July 31, 1981.
9 Ibid., Sept. 25, 1981.
11 Ibid., Aug. 6, 1982.