

# NICARAGUA



## Report of the Delegation from the Graphical, Paper and Media Sector of Unite the Union

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As part of a solidarity campaign delegation, seven members from the GPM Sector of Unite and two other trade union colleagues, travelled to Nicaragua on 15th July to spend time in the country learning about the challenges facing workers. Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and with over 70% of employees working within the informal sector, it was a chance to find out what difficulties these workers encounter and how trade unions were operating to improve their conditions. We would also be meeting various community groups and co-operatives to hear about how workers are striving towards self sufficiency despite the ongoing pressures of globalisation.

Battles between internal rival political groups and repeated foreign government interventions from Europe and the US have wreaked havoc on Nicaragua for much of the last two centuries. The popular insurrection and overthrow of

the Somoza dictatorship was finally achieved in 1979 but aided by economic and military pressure from the US, the Sandinistas were defeated in 1990. With the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional) party back in government with Daniel Ortega running the executive branch, it was also a chance for us to take part in the 30th anniversary celebrations of the Sandinista Revolution of 1979.

After an introduction meeting we had an opportunity to have a brief tour of the sights of Managua, the country's capital. This included visiting the Tiscapa Sandino Park, Sandino museum, the square of the revolution and the lakeshore. Nicaragua has an extremely authentic character that preserves it from the pressures of mass tourism and its natural beauty is a guarded secret. Managua has 20% of the country's population yet there is little overcrowding and its green landscape rather than buildings are clear to see from the stunning view at Tiscapa. It is where we would spend the majority of the trip as it is known as the heartbeat of the Nicaraguan economy and psyche.

*Photographs by Alison Jones*



## Meeting with José Angel Bermudez – FNT, National Front of Workers, Executive Secretary



The FNT was formed in 1990 after the election of the Chamorro government with its initial purpose being a political body that would give workers a voice on a national level. It operates as a national federation, similar to the TUC within the UK, and includes the seven umbrella Sandinista trade unions representing workers within health, education,

manufacturing and more recently the informal sector. 920 unions through the country, with 180,000 members affiliate to the FNT and they are growing at a rapid pace with trade union membership on the rise since the election of the FSLN government.

We met with José in the grounds of one of the country's largest universities whilst the ALBA Social Movements Conference was taking place. José outlined the political scene within the country and how a main aim of the FNT was to promote the alliance and plan of the left wing countries within the region to work together and influence government programmes which would benefit the countries people. With little developed industry only 19% of Nicaraguan workers are classed within the formal sector and therefore have access to social security. One of the FNT's aims was to achieve universal access to social security for all workers, including those within the informal sector.

With 65% of those working in the formal sector being under the age of 40, schooling and free education was also extremely important. Under previous governments the illiteracy rate was running at 55% but since the FSLN came to power a major success has been transforming education within Nicaragua and now the rate stands at only 4.7%. Technical training for workers was also a key aim.

José outlined the difficulties for the FNT regarding organising the informal sector. The strategy was to attempt to formalise these workers and allow them to create their own businesses. This would legitimise their employment status, allow them have a licence to work and pay taxes, therefore entitling them to social security benefits. With over one million workers and only 40,000 unionised, this is an ongoing effort and its challenges cannot be underestimated. But with the inspiring motto of "ni un paso atras" – "not one step back", it's clear the FNT will face and take on this challenge.

## Closure of the ALBA Social Movements Conference – report by Nigel Gawthrop

Within the grounds of a university complex we were fortunate to attend the closure of the ALBA Social Movements Conference. Although it was difficult to listen to the entire debate with only one translator, what was clear was the generous welcome we received by the speakers and the audience as they thanked us for our support and solidarity.

The conference had representatives from Venezuela, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, Panama, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. The social movement is made up from various groupings including environmental organisations, women's movements and trade unions. The banner above the stage had the message: "*En Saludo a los 30 años de la revolucion. Sandino Viva...La lucha Sigue*" which translated to "*Saluting 30yrs of revolution. Sandino lives...the struggle continues*".



The representative from Venezuela spoke about "la Grande Colombia" a Greater Colombia, which is Bolivarian dream of one great nation of Latin America. They explained how this would require the participation, co-operation and solidarity of all the states of Latin America. The speaker warned of collaborations between right wing factions, including the church, who attempted to block these ideals and cited the recent events of the attempted coup against Hugo Chavez and the coup d' état in Honduras that ousted the democratically elected President, Manuel Zelaya.

Orlando Nunez, an adviser to Daniel Ortega on social issues, outlined the government's strategy on social policy. He advised that in order to progress certain initiatives the FSLN did have to make uncomfortable alliances as unlike Venezuela and Bolivia, the Nicaraguan government does not have an overall controlling majority. Nunez identified that the enemies of social progress were clearly identifiable as the multi-nationals and the right wing media.

## Visit to the barrios in Managua to celebrate the "Day of Happiness" commemorating the departure of the dictator Anastasio Somoza from Nicaragua in 1979.

The welcome that we received in the barrios was overwhelming. Despite their poverty by Western standards, the hospitality given to one of our delegates who was staying with a family was extremely generous. As we arrived the community was out to greet us with music playing and chairs borrowed from neighbours to ensure we were made comfortable. Although "barrios" is not a direct translation of a poor area, but just a definition of a community, it was obvious that the





majority did fall into this category yet the warmth and openness of the people could not be ignored. Their allegiance to the FSLN, who they clearly saw as their party, was continually voiced

and was certainly not reflective of the views from the civil co-ordinators.



### Visit to COMPAS, Women in Action, the women from the poorest barrios in the lake shore of Managua.

Women in Action was started nine years ago in an extremely poor area by the lake side of Managua. Its main aim was to assist children within the area to attend school which would not generally be the norm especially as the majority of the women in the community were single parents. The group started by meeting in the street, then an iron shack and yet when we visited they had managed to build and congregate



in a purpose built community hall. They promoted making items for the women to sell and have grown in numbers over the years to now standing at 35 members with over 100 children benefiting from the programme. The women are also encouraged to participate in adult education as most of them missed any learning opportunities earlier in life. Our visit was truly inspiring which lead delegates to embark upon sponsorships schemes for the children involved. We also bought various hand made gifts as it was obvious that the members of the group did not wish to have charity but a fair wage for their labour.

### Visit to UNE, National Union of Public Sector Workers – Domingo Pérez, General Secretary

UNE is the major public sector union that has represented workers since its formation in 1978. Its membership did dramatically decrease since 1990 due of the previous privatisation of publicly owned services. However since the FSLN came to power, over 350 companies have been nationalised and this has resulted in 25% of workers within these workplaces coming back into the public sector. UNE were campaigning for land reform and free health and education access predominately. They saw any advances made from 1979 wiped out by the Chamorro government as they left the neediest to the responsibility of a market economy. The wide range of privatisation of public companies was demonstrated by the example of power companies that resulted in workers losing any rights to collective bargaining overnight. They were campaigning for a "facilitating government" which would have a direct influence over laws on taxes and government procurement within the public sector. A major concern for the union was the potential dismissal of its members due to political changes at local level. Important legal advice to represent its members fully was being sought from Unison as workers were regularly being fired, even under the present regime.

### Street Concert in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution in barrio La Primavera

Quite unbelievable was the street celebration that had been organised for the 30th anniversary celebration within La Primavera barrio. The effort that the entire community had injected into the display was evident. Although they operated with extremely limited resources, the children had been afforded fantastic costumes that helped to show off their level of dance practice in carrying out the carefully constructed routines. The sense of community was touching.



## Coordinadora Civil (Civil Co-ordinating Entity for the Emergency and Reconstruction) – report by Tom Murphy

On 17th July the delegation met Luisa Molina and Fidel Moreira of the Coordinadora Civil (CC).

The Civil Co-ordinator is a body that brings together various sectors of society in Nicaragua. It is autonomous and not connected to any religious or political grouping although, from the 600 organisations that made up “the civil society movement”, the majority have their roots in Sandinismo but are no longer affiliated with the FSLN. Its vision includes the construction of active citizenship and the proposal of policies of social, economic and cultural transformation. Its mission is to articulate the efforts and facilitate the development of capacities to affect the construction of a democratic, equitable, human, developed and viable Nicaragua politically. It aims to advance a proposal of a National Plan of Development as an alternative to the one presented by the government of Nicaragua.

Our visit to the Coordinadora Civil raised many questions as although the impression received of the government’s and the trade unions’ efforts was on balance primarily positive not everyone held that view to be an accurate reflection. The views of the Co-ordinadora Civil are documented below:

The CC have a human rights approach and are independent of the government, churches, unions, etc. They believe that Nicaragua has been trapped by political differences for over 150 years which has contributed to war and poverty in the country. Despite being rich in natural resources of land and gold, the distribution of wealth is very unfair in the country. They claim that 7% of Nicaragua’s budget is used to pay internal debt direct to bankers while only 3.4% goes to education and 3.5% to health services. They also complain that the national budget does not include resources for women and children and, over the last decade, Nicaragua has gone backwards regarding the rights of women and children.

For the past two years the CC believe that the current government completely ignores and excludes its people has no policies and no respect for the constitution. They claim that recently a demonstration organised by the civil society organisations regarding the situation in Honduras and civil rights was hijacked by FSLN/FNT militants who forced them to abandon the protest.

The Civil Societies has put together proposal for the development of the country, which they want to be an all inclusive and discussed with the people of Nicaragua. They include:

- How to take advantage of their demographic position – in the last thirty years there are more young people who will have a big impact on the country’s development.
- How to deal with the world prices
- To create spaces for national dialogue.
- Change electoral law
- Sack the officers in charge of elections as they state that the EU proposed new elections due to alleged fraud.

## Celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution



Walking towards the celebration you gained a clear indication on what this celebration meant to a majority of people within Nicaragua. The streets were lined with flags

and even children were out celebrating a political moment that although never experienced, they had been taught never to forget. The atmosphere was electric and it seemed that every citizen in Nicaragua had turned out to witness this event. The speech from Daniel Ortega captivated the crowds yet the spontaneous celebration continued afterwards as strangers danced in the square united in celebration of past historical events and renewed hope for the future.



## Visit to La Concha Nicaraguan Community Movement



Travelling into the Nicaraguan countryside, we visited various co-operative groups whose aims were to achieve better living conditions for their members and the community. The majority of the membership were women as there was a lack of a male presence working within the local community and also in the children's lives. These co-operatives attempt to mobilise the community with an emphasis



on providing education, health and better housing for its members. Although they had forged alliances with the government and the Farmers Union, they wished to be self sufficient by growing produce they can sell for a living wage. The natural resources from the country meant that produce such as beans, marrow and various fruits could be farmed to be sold. One co-operative had progressed its product with development aid from the government and was selling wine and marmalade made from the local fruit supply.



We also had an opportunity to meet the mayor who welcomed visits by solidarity groups. He outlined how Nicaragua had suffered from war and natural disasters which largely contributed to its problems regarding poverty. However, the future for the country was extremely positive as along side the governments' three aims of improving education, health and housing; the 2009 budget he had been provided with would be spent locally on programmes to improve access to running water, power distribution and road access. As part of our delegation, we took part in a temporary road repair community action project. Although extremely hot, the community would come together in order to repair roads damaged by rain fall with limited tools.

## Visit to Escuela Barrio Santa Rosa

With key funding from the UK provided by the Santa Rosa Fund we visited a school that had been set up which provided schooling to over 800 pupils in an extremely poor barrio. The project was founded in 1988 and started modestly with few materials and books being provided. Now that access to education was free the school employed 29 teachers with pupils



attending in morning and afternoon shifts. Class sizes are obviously very large with 50 per class not being unusual. This was a challenging environment for the teachers employed in the school however they did report that teacher training under the government was a priority. The school was not only concerned with the academic elements of a curriculum but wished to educate the children on social problems such as teenage pregnancy and domestic violence.

## Visit to ANDEN – the teaching union

We met with José Antonio Zepeda, General Secretary of ANDEN, the Nicaraguan teachers' union who is also Deputy Co-ordinator of the FNT and an FSLN MP. ANDEN is one of the largest teaching trade unions representing over 50% of primary and secondary school teachers. José emphasised how important solidarity with other trade unions is and expressed disappointment that relationships with the UK teachers unions was positive during the 1980s yet changed during the 1990s when they switched their focus to Asia and Africa. Ironically, it was during the 1990s when ANDEN needed this support more than ever as the Chamorro regime was in power. He spoke about the challenges that faced his union as although the numbers of teachers had dramatically improved under the FSLN, the number due to retire would create a crisis in teacher numbers. Encouraging young people to enter the profession was important but also educating them on collective bargaining and trade unions was a challenge for ANDEN. They also wished for teachers to have a greater say in the new curriculum and a consultation process was ongoing with the Ministry of Education. As with other public sector workers, salaries and access to housing has improved which has assisted in stopping teachers having to work secondary employment and concentrate on their vocation.



## Visit to CTCP – The national Federation of Informal Workers

CTCP is the latest union to be affiliated to the FNT. It was formed in May 2002 and is now made up of 98 different unions with over 42,000 members. Their members are typically street sellers therefore labour relations between employers and employees in this sector are quite different from traditional labour relationships. The unions' aims are to develop a different business model for these workers that is not based on profit but on ensuring social welfare. They wish to have recognition and formality for their members and have designed a strategy with the FNT to achieve this. Although these workers generate over 60% of GDP, they do not have access to social security. CTCP demands include; creating stable employment, access to credit & funding, social security and housing entitlements. The establishment of community mutual funds were also assisting these workers whilst the struggles continue.



collective bargaining rights, unemployment and salary levels for their members. Under previous governments, over 400 once publicly owned companies had been privatised and the trade unions aim was to organise and strengthen their membership rights. With foreign investment in Nicaragua, the trade unions have attempted to establish good working conditions with some success and failure. Certain multi-nationals have sacked workers attempting to form their own trade union and CST is actively engaged with lobbying against this practice.

Having the opportunity to meet with a comrade from the GPM sector, we asked specifically about this industry. Armando reported that most print companies were operated as small family owned businesses. Most workers learnt their



trade through on the job training as there was extremely low access to technical training. Most of the packaging was produced by transnational companies, with Quebecor having a high interest in Nicaragua. Standards of Health & safety at work were often being violated and work was being undertaken with the government and universities to improve this situation. Laws surrounding H & S were only passed one year ago therefore they emphasised it is still a relatively new right for workers.

## Visits to the Association of Popular Education, Carlos Fonseca Amador

The national literacy campaign was one of the first activities of the Sandinista government in the 1980s as they aimed to provide a free education programme. Unfortunately with the change of government in the 1990s all their efforts were destroyed and were on hold until 2005 when the FSLN government was provided with funds from Cuba to restart the programme. The challenges they faced were immense as facilities in the barrios were extremely limited with many communities bonding together to gain learning opportunities. Teaching the population to read



and write was also about empowering them to understand that they "do matter" and education on health and respect followed as a consequence.

## Workplace visits within the free trade zones (FTZ)

Although free trade zones have existed since 1970, the number of people employed within them has increased rapidly. There are now over 85, predominately foreign owned, employing over 75,000 workers. Union repression is commonplace within the FTZ factories and conditions are generally poor with long working hours, high targets of production expected and low pay. Recent minimum wage increases under the FSLN government have led to threats of businesses being relocated outside Nicaragua. Federations of trade unions campaigning to reverse this position are strengthening links with organisations and unions within the consumer countries to highlight the plight of the workers. We had an opportunity to visit two workplaces, a textile and plastics factory, and speak with local representatives. We witnessed the poor health & safety standards in operation and gained information about the terms and conditions of the workers.

## Meeting the CST-JBE: Industrial and Manufacturing Union

The CST represents workers in the industrial and manufacturing sectors and we had the opportunity to meet with representatives including Miguel A Ruiz Estrada, General Secretary and Armando Zepeda Lopez, from the federation that represented paper and plastic sector workers.

The confederation is made up of 16 different federations; 120 trade unions with over 50,000 members. They were organising in many different sectors including; construction, electrical production and the food and fishing industry. Serious issues that faced the trade unions were; lack of



## **U.S.L.C. Sewing & Cutting Company (Textiles)**

On arrival at U.S.L.C. De Nicaragua our delegation was welcomed by the company Human Resources Manager and the Trade Union Shop Steward. After initial discussions, the Human Resources Manager explained how he came from a very poor family and that he worked his way from the lowest position within the company. He stated that anyone with potential and commitment can go far within the company. Many of the current shop floor managers had followed this progression, we were told.

It was stated that the company has a very good relationship with the Trade Union and have worked together on setting up extensive worker and trade union programmes. We were shown around the shop floor and conditions were somewhat different to anything that our delegation have experienced in the past. There were 38 production lines in the main factory area, so although the shop floor area was vast, the sheer volume of workers within these areas made it extremely confined and the temperature was very hot and humid. Nevertheless, the sheer speed and dexterity of the workers impressed our whole delegation.

There are 1,800 workers employed at U.S.L.C., of which 450 are trade union members. The workers are split between two shifts. 90% on the main day shift, which begins at 7am and ends at 5pm and work 48 hours per week spread over six days. The remaining 10% work the night shift on which they do 42 hours per week. Both shifts are on the same rate of pay – night shift premium equates to fewer hours for equal pay.

There is a bonus scheme in addition to the workers' wages, although this is affected by the workflows and product mix. Workers are more likely to earn larger bonuses when large orders for one product are going through the factory. This can greatly supplement the workers wages.

The factory tour was followed by a meeting with the U.S.L.C. Trade Union representatives. The local union here was named after the date of formation of this union – 28th May. The representative

**U.S.L.C. De Nicaragua (United States Levi Company) is a USA based organisation that provides textiles, mainly Dockers Chino trousers, for export to the USA and Latin America.**

explained his position within the trade union. Each member of the 28th May Union introduced themselves and their respective positions also.

There are eleven union members on the Executive Committee and the representative was proud of how closely the Committee works together. Our delegation was impressed by the organisation and structure of the 28th May Union. The representative explained the basic structure of the union which is similar to manufacturing unions in the UK. The committee consists of the factory shop steward, union secretary, health & safety representatives and departmental or section representatives.

The representative explained how bargaining on terms and conditions is carried out by the union. There are no local agreements. All bargaining is carried out at national level every six months and these terms are mandatory for manufacturing companies in Nicaragua – trade union recognised or not. No employee earns less than the minimum wage, which is \$125 per month. As previously mentioned, workers' wages are supplemented by bonuses which are linked to productivity and quality.

The 28th May Committee certainly gave the impression of a well organised group, notwithstanding the relative lack of experience as they were formed only four years previously. The group were also happy with the relationship with the management of U.S.L.C. and believed the relationship to be reasonably pro-active.

The representative's main concern was also highlighted by members of our delegation – low level of union membership from the shop floor. He talked about the apathy shown by the shop floor workers towards joining the union – something consistent in any shop floor environment – and how there was a belief that the Union has not created a positive change for the workers. Many workers appear apprehensive towards joining the Union.

It would be interesting to find out how much incentive is shown by the management for not joining the Union – "all workers have the chance to become managers!"

The positive change created by the union is obvious. New social benefits for all have been secured through national agreements which have never been witnessed before in the manufacturing sector. All workers now benefit from three weeks' paid holidays plus all bank holiday entitlements, with no employee earning below the national minimum wage.



## **Plastico Modernos (Plastic Bag Manufacturer)**

On arrival at Plastico Modernos our delegation was met by the company owner and a production manager. Our delegation was very surprised by the manner of both company officials – both continually apologised for the condition of the factory we were about to visit and that we may be shocked by what conditions we were about to witness. We were not disappointed.

The shop floor was extremely cramped, unbearably hot and humid, with the overpowering smell of fumes from the inks, plastics and solvents used in the printing process throughout the factory.

Apart from the sporadic use of ear plugs, there appeared to be no occupational health & safety provision whatsoever in the factory. On inspection of the shop floor area we could see that

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all gangways were blocked, the warehouse area was totally overloaded and over stacked and the machinery in all departments had no guarding on any contact danger points.

In addition to this, a question was asked regarding chemical analysis on all the compounds used throughout the process. We were told that no analysis has been carried out nor did they plan to do an analysis in the future.

Considering the volume of work that Plastico Modernos produce, there isn't a preventative maintenance programme in place. This was plain to see when inspecting the plant machinery. Both main printing presses were in a poor state of repair with press number two being covered in ink on every station. As the plant machinery in this factory runs 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, it is hard to comprehend how they can maintain efficient productivity due to lack of a maintenance programme.

When you think that this is a primary packaging company, it makes you wonder what hygiene controls there are in place and what standard these controls have as this company adheres to customer hygiene regulations for the industry. We were told that the company's main customers were Wal-Mart and Nestlé.

The contrast between hygiene standards for these two corporations in the developed world and the developing world is huge. Plastico Modernos simply would not meet the required standards if they operated in this manner say in Europe or Northern America.

With regards to the employees, the production manager stated that there were currently no employee training programmes at the company. If a position on the shop floor that demands a certain skill level becomes vacant, recruitment is external and not internal. There is currently no internal employee progression.

After the tour of the factory with the production manager, we were introduced to the company union representative. The company union is called Julio Chamorro.

The union representative explained to us that employees worked on two shifts. The main day shift works 12 hours on, 12 hours off, working 48 hours per week. The second shift works on a 3 shift per day pattern – 6 to 2, 2 to 10, 10 to 6 – 7 days per week.

Those employees who work nights qualify for a night working bonus. The basic minimum wage applies to all employees at Plastico Modernos, which contributes to 40% of an employee's wages. Approximately, the remaining 60% is made up from productivity bonuses.

Plastico Modernos is a Spanish/Nicaraguan company that has been operating out of Managua for more than fifty years. It provides primary packaging to food industries – both national and international.

Our delegation were obviously concerned about the total lack of a health & safety programme within Plastico Modernos. We asked the union representative what procedures were in place. We were told that there were no mandatory PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) standards in place. However, a daily monitoring and reporting schedule is carried out by a health & safety representative from the shop floor.

What outcomes were gained from this procedure remained unclear as we certainly could not see any preventative measures in place.

The union representative was asked what healthcare and sick pay benefits employees are entitled to. He said they had paid visits to a healthcare clinic locally, full pay for employees who have been injured as a result of a workplace accident and that labour risks are covered 100% by a compensation policy paid by the company as part of a collective bargaining agreement at national level.

The representative told our delegation the main issue regarding health & safety were due to the fledgling health & safety laws within Nicaragua. The current laws have only been in place for just over one year so implementation of these laws is a key issue in manufacturing.

As a result of these new laws, improved collective bargaining agreements are being carried out at national level by the manufacturing unions and the Government.



[www.nicaraguasc.org.uk](http://www.nicaraguasc.org.uk)

[www.unitetheunion.com](http://www.unitetheunion.com)



## Want to get involved?

It is recognised that the influences on the working lives of Unite members now extend far beyond the borders of the UK and Ireland. Developments and decisions taken at an international level, often by multi-national companies, can have a serious impact on Unite and its members. Unite can no longer represent effectively the interests of its members, without being active on the international stage. Please visit our website and choose the link to the International Department as it illustrates the extent and variety of the international work Unite is engaged in.

For more information about Unite's international activities and events and to be kept informed of issues and campaigns please go to the website: <http://www.unitetheunion.org/resources/international.aspx> and complete the form online, or why not affiliate to the NSCAG. Many projects, both trade union and community based, need your support so please visit their website for more details. You may also be interested in taking part in a delegation to Nicaragua. If so, why not invite a delegate to speak at your next branch or workplace meeting?