

IF WE'RE AT WAR, WE'RE LOSING: How Nicaragua Thrives Despite Illegal U.S. Intervention

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The silhouette of Augusto Sandino looms at the site of his assassination in Managua.

In March 2021, I traveled to Nicaragua as a delegate with the Sanctions Kill! Coalition delegation to witness the impact of the “coercive measures” the U.S. uses to impose its political and economic interests, rationalized by its allegations of repression and political crisis. Yet rather than find a people under dictatorship, I arrived to a society thrumming with autonomous productivity, bolstered by decades of redistributed wealth, historic self-determination and a disciplined sense of resiliency.



Families enjoy Monday evening at a park in Granada. Community parks are well-attended throughout Nicaragua.

There's a feeling in the air that the U.S. media hasn't quite been able to put its finger on. Perhaps it's fourteen consistent years under a government which provides its people a level of support that most in the U.S. can hardly fathom. While we, the richest country in the world, debate over trillions of dollars of student debt and a failing healthcare system that causes hundreds of thousands of deaths, the poorest country in Central America offers universal healthcare and free university education to all of its citizens.



A paletero, or ice cream vendor, in the streets of Managua. Unlike in many countries throughout Latin America and the U.S., street vending is completely legal here.

The memory of the bloody Somoza regime, scars of the U.S.-funded contra war, and the loss of progress to seventeen years under neoliberal capitalism are felt throughout Nicaragua. The history is kept alive through the celebration of the people's triumph. It is felt in the public parks named after children who lost their lives to contra rebels and at the Salvador Allende Port, once part of Nicaragua's notorious garbage dump. The surrounding area is now a neighborhood of more than two hundred homes for the people who had survived picking through the dump's refuse and who now have formal employment at a nearby recycling center. Throughout the country one finds these tangible symbols of revolution in the community's sense of ownership over public space.



Two boys and a goat on La Montañita, Estelí, where attacks from Somoza's National Guard are still remembered by its residents. Today, La Montañita is home to many small scale farms.

The history is felt, as well, because the repression against Nicaragua and its people's freedom has never ended. US economic sanctions against the country have prevented international aid, loans and trade deals for a number of years, despite the illegality of sanctions under international law. Sanctions have been particularly devastating during the pandemic, and have ruined brilliant solutions to poverty – such as the Petrocaribe Agreement between Latin American countries, an exchange of goods which moved the region away from dependence on the U.S. and World Bank. While many in the U.S. would insist that these sanctions are an acceptable alternative to ammunition, they should be widely regarded for what they are: a form of criminal warfare.



Don Mateo at his home on La Montañita, Estelí, explaining the joy and benefit of living off the land.

But Nicaragua refuses to be colonized. Feeding over 80% of its entire population, their self-reliant food system provides an example for a world facing climate change. This was made possible by massive land reform: over half of the country's land was redistributed to peasants and small farmers during the Sandinista Revolution (1979-1990). Now, small-scale farming produces 85% of the country's food and owns 62% of the land. The government contributes the resources for rural landowners to live sustainably by granting loans, livestock and agricultural supplies through their *bono productivo (production packages)* program [also known as Zero Hunger], and educational projects throughout the countryside teach agroecological methods to make the most of these resources.



Silke and her son Alexander at the Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region of Nicaragua University.

With respect to education, Nicaragua sets another leading example. Since returning to office in 2007, the Sandinista Front provides preschool, primary and secondary students with free meals, backpacks and uniforms to supplement their education. Once graduated, students have the option of attending free technical school or public university - 6% of the national budget is devoted to providing universal higher education to the population. We visited one such public university, the University of the Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region of Nicaragua, which uses Indigenous philosophy focused on rescuing generational knowledge. Their intercultural form of education provides undergraduate, graduate and PhD programs to the multiethnic communities which reside on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast.



A fisherman points to his boat off Corn Island, located on the autonomous Caribbean coast.

The autonomous Caribbean Region is a unique example of Indigenous sovereignty organized within the national context. Self-governing municipalities have access to state programs which supply resources to the region. One year after the most recent sanctions went into effect, the Sandinista government finished the first highway to ever connect the Caribbean to the Pacific coast, creating access to areas which had previously been in isolation and allowing easier movement of people, farm and sea products. In the past several years, the region has seen massive amounts of development including going from very little electricity to nearly complete coverage of electricity and the construction of hospitals in every municipality. Last November, when hurricanes Eta and Iota ravaged the coast, 160,000 people were relocated in advance—0 died. The government has helped in rebuilding through efforts like *Plan Techo*, which provided over half a million new roofs to the coastal communities within a month of the hurricanes.



Gerardo at sunset beside the Mombacho volcano.

What is clear is that the U.S. would love to see Nicaragua suffer, that it is waging its war not just against the government, but against its workers, its mothers and its children. It is clear, at least, to the Nicaraguan people; they have fought this war for over a century.

Upon returning to the U.S., news has broken that a Democratic senator is introducing further sanctions on Nicaragua, cutting it off further from developmental aid. Paid social media posts and fabricated reports bury the country's extraordinary reality, producing their own hostile version. In Washington, the think tanks are publishing their lauded studies, while back in Nicaragua someone is doing the real work, plunging a shovel into the fertile ground.