The second of our major achievements, with the support of the government of *Comandante* Daniel and the Sandinista Front, is that we have reduced migration, we have reduced child labour, which was one of our greatest scourges. In addition, we succeeded in training in this period more than 6,000 of our members in different fields, such as basic administration skills for microenterprises, technology, human relations and project formulation. As a result of this we succeeded in organising more than 65,000 employees in this period, which represents quite a large and quite an important sector of our country’s economy.

These workers have been organised by us in three major groups. The first is what we call production. What do we mean by production workers? Those who give added value to raw material, for example we mean leather for footwear, we mean preserved fruit which is also used for jam, those people who give added value to fruit and vegetables. Those are the ones we mean when we talk about production. From this we get the trade that we’re familiar with, in markets, at bus stops, at traffic lights.

And there’s the other big group which is services. What do we mean by services? Transport, such as moto-taxi operators, taxi drivers, money exchange workers, people who repair mobile phones… that’s an important sector which contributes to the national economy. That has made it possible for this sector to be integrated, to be developed, to be promoted within the national economy. There are other things which still need to be done of course, which I’ll explain later on.

So those are the most important things we have achieved. We also succeeded in having 25 kiosks installed in front of the UCA (Universidad Centro Americana) here in Managua which we recently handed over. We’re planning to hand over 48 more kiosks, in the Siete Sur district as well as in Metro Centro, at the bus stops in the Hospital Velez País and in Parque Las Piedrecitas. This is a first, and on top of that we provide support. We’ve had technical training sessions and workshops which have been run for example by INTUR (Institute of Tourism), the Ministry of Household Economy and also INATEC (National Technological Institute).

For example, we have trained five doctors, the children of workers who went to Cuba and are now working here as doctors in local communities. We have just helped produce more than 48 graduates in different areas such as law, business administration, economics, social sciences, computing. It’s a significant achievement, very significant actually because these students have received scholarships thanks to the ‘6% for universities’[[1]](#footnote-1), so this is what we have been working on with the support of the government.

There is something else which people don’t know about or which is not widely known, which is the progress which has been made regarding border posts. For example, what’s happening here is what’s known as customs integration. This means that everything included in the main area both of Customs and Immigration and Residency is to be expanded and developed in order to provide a better service to ordinary people and to business. In the specific case of Peñas Blancas, we managed to get jobs for 734 of these workers, of whom 88 found work in Customs – these are people who used to be self-employed, who sold chewing gum and sweets at border crossings and who now work for Customs. We also succeeded in finding work for ten people in the Directorate General of Immigration and Residency (DGME)**.** They’re now immigration officers. We also have two tourism inspectors.

In addition, for 37 of our workers we succeeded in getting the government to pay them a reduced pension without paying a single contribution. This is the proof that in the government’s National Human Development Plan, which it publicly announced, the reduction in poverty is identified as a priority. And where the reduction in poverty is concerned the self-employed workers’ sector is the most important. We can already see here the National Trade Fair Centre. We now have the training programmes in place, we have the open-air markets here in the Avenida Bolívar. Those are all the things we’ve achieved in this sector.

So far we have 65,000 workers organized. We have eight federations which make up our federation. We also have a Women’s Committee which deals with all of the issues which affect women. We have a Youth Committee which deals with the problems facing young people, the work of young people. And on top of that, we have seven district councils and four municipal councils. This helps the work we’re doing, our victories throughout the country. So it’s fair to say this sector is very important. We have achieved levels of influence and involvement thanks to the opportunity which the government has given us as members of the National Labour Council and the National Minimum Wage Commission. We’re members of the National Transport Commission. We’re members of the National Tourism Commission and also of the National Household Economy Commission and the Customs Integration Commission.

So that means that there’s a high level of influence and involvement. Another example, thanks to Dr. Roberto López, head of the National Institute of Social Security (INSS), is the registration of 4000 self-employed workers – lottery ticket sellers, taxi and moto-taxi drivers. Those are our significant achievements in this period. And in addition there’s the recognition we have received from the government, from state institutions, municipal governments – all the support we’ve received.

*In terms of weaknesses, what are the areas that you need to address?*

There are still problems. It’s not the case that everything has been dealt with. But the progress we’ve made represents what I said to you at the start, which is the importance of this sector. Why is the self-employed workers’ sector so important? There are five reasons I’ll mention which explain its importance. Number one, it creates employment. We don’t go around looking for work. We create employment. And on top of that we generate that wealth which we produce and we divide it fairly. Nobody holds on to it. No single person accumulates it.

Another factor which must be taken into account is that we are the ones who pay the biggest share of direct and indirect taxes. Another factor is that 70% of the workers in this country are self-employed workers, creating work and creating wealth. And the other thing is that we, with what I’ve said, bring stability to the country and make it possible to govern. That’s a big part of the efforts that the police make, that the army make, to guarantee public safety. We also play a major role in bringing safety, stability and governability to this country.

There’s a very important factor in all this. What are the challenges we have to face? Training and introducing technology into the sector as result of poverty. Because it’s a sector which has been excluded, marginalised, abandoned, even, I would say, punished for working in public spaces, it stagnated as a result. Poverty has built up over many years and it has two dimensions. The first is material poverty, which is easier to address, and we’re working on that. For example, we’re putting up stalls, they’re being done up, we’re helping people out with building materials for their houses, for their dwellings. That’s very important for the people in the sector. Another thing which we have available is credit.

We have an agreement which provides for the financing of the transformation of tricycles into moto-taxis. So we have signed an agreement in the region of $100,000 for the replacement of tricycles by moto-taxis. That’s another agreement we have, quite a healthy portfolio, quite a decent portfolio which I think is only 3.5% behind schedule. So that’s something else we have achieved. And with *Usura Cero*[[2]](#footnote-2), we’re also now at work putting together groups. Solidarity groups have already been created through the organization. So far we have received very little - we’re only just getting started. We became involved with *Usura Cero* a year ago. Most of people’s involvement has been through neighbourhood associations, but now we’re doing it too.

So the challenges are to continue training and fight poverty in the sector, and we’re talking about material poverty. But there’s another factor involved which is technical and professional training, because poverty builds up in people’s minds. It’s a problem we’ll inevitably have to deal with, a task we still have to do. Another major challenge which I’ve discussed with others in the movement is that organizing self-employed workers does not just include our own people but rather *all* self-employed workers. We’re talking about fishermen, cooperatives, small and medium producers, SMEs. According to the Central Bank of Nicaragua we generate 54% of GDP, which makes it very significant.

So the social movements have a highly-developed organisational process, a very strong, broad level of social organisation, which can be seen for example in the 72% popularity rating for *Comandante* Daniel. If there were elections today *Comandante* Daniel would win with 72% of the vote. This is down to the fact that we are well-organised, which enables us to keep up the struggle and enabled us to draw up the Human Development Plan, which still has to be implemented, and that’s where the big problem lies. The informal economy is not organised, which is why the impact is not felt in the family or the community or the national economy because it is fragmented.

That’s a job which we have to do together, the government, the unions, the cooperatives and all the revolutionary social organisations. We have to organise our economy so that it has an impact. One of the things we have found is that we as self-employed workers are not considered eligible for loans. We have had to create our own funds in order to finance our own activities. We have created a cooperative called *Vientos de Esperanza* (Winds of Hope). This cooperative is what enables us to arrange loans for our fellow members. Of course it’s not enough. It’s very little for the huge demand which exists.

A journalist was asking me not long ago what I think about what the Americans are saying about their new NICA law[[3]](#footnote-3). And I answered him that it will affect us here in Nicaragua because it will affect a lot of programmes which are in the pipeline because of a lack of resources, because there will be cutbacks. But in any case private banks don’t lend to us and in our sector those who lend to us or lend to you, but that loan is something you can never escape from. We have discussed this a good deal and we said that one of the things in order to escape from poverty is that we have to create our own sources of finance.

We also have to fight for access to the market. We have to fight for our own trading system with other countries, just as big businesses have, just as big national consortiums have. This is a major challenge for us. The last thing I would say, the most important thing and that’s our commitment to those to whom we’re indebted, and that’s *Comandante* Daniel and

*Compañera* Rosario. Our commitment is to cast our vote on November 6, because it means a vote to continue building Nicaragua, it means continue moving forward with our strategic plans, it means having hope and having a future.

1. TN: the Nicaraguan Constitution stipulates that 6% of the national budget be earmarked for higher education. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Usura Cero* is a scheme which provides loans at very low interest rates to Nicaraguan women. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Reference to the NICA act, passed by the U.S. Congress in September 2016, which commits the US to voting against the granting of any loans made to Nicaragua by international institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)