

## **Nicanet Meeting Denounces US Intervention and Discusses Water Issues**

*By Katherine Hoyt*

The Nicaragua Network's National Leadership Meeting was held on April 22 and 23, 2006, in Washington, DC, at the Washington Seminar Center on Capitol Hill. Attendees were greeted by Donna Leist, chair of Nicanet's Executive Committee and the meeting began as is the custom with a go-around in which committee representatives gave reports on their activities during the past year. Here is a sampling: Bill Lankford reported that the Central America Solar Energy Project has been working in Condega and in Honduras and Guatemala on sustainable energy projects. Tom Baker of the Chicago Nicaragua Solidarity Committee has been fully involved with organizing activities of the Latin American Solidarity Coalition, including the demonstration last summer demanding that the AFL-CIO cease receiving money from the National Endowment for Democracy. Jim Walker of the Solentiname Solidarity Alliance of Vermont said that his organization uses the money from the sale of art work by the residents of the archipelago for development projects on the islands.

Meanwhile, in western Massachusetts, John Brentlinger reported that the Solentiname, Nicaragua, Friendship Project is funding education projects on the islands. Peter Baicich of the Howard County (MD) Friends of Latin America described his group's work in solidarity with Cuba, Bolivia and other Andean countries as well as sale of shade-grown coffee. Tim Jeffries reported that now that the Bend (OR) -- Condega Sister City relationship is official, they are expecting to do more student exchanges and a mural exchange. Eleven people went on this year's delegation, he noted, adding that they delivered a fire truck to Condega. Casa Baltimore-Limay, which will celebrate 20 years of solidarity, is building houses and establishing a chicken cooperative, explained Barbara Larcom. The city of Baltimore wants to make the relationship official, she added.

Arnie Matlin reported that the Ciudad Hermana Task Force, which is a sistering project between Rochester, NY, and El Sauce, continues its loan fund and has been sending fourth year medical students from Rochester to El Sauce to work for a rotation seeing patients. Jim Burchell said that Peaceworks of New Jersey continues to send containers of material aid to Masaya while also working with street children and on literacy. Don Wiley reported that El Porvenir continues to support self-help community water projects as well as latrines and reforestation. Linking up faith communities in the US and Nicaragua is the work of the Asociación Kairos, reported Newell Hendricks. He said that the organization also works in leadership development and has done education on CAFTA. Rita Clark said that the Nicaragua-U.S. Friendship Office continues to work with the organization COMPA on issues of debt and trade and against water privatization. Zelmira Cannan said that the Casa Nicaragua-Philadelphia-Camden sends medical aid to Nicaragua.

Following the go-around about the work of the local committees, it was time for the staff to make their reports on the years work. Barbara Larcom reported on the success of the Sister City Conference in Managua last July which was attended by 250 people both from the US and Nicaragua. This author reported on the work of the year in the area of information, including the Nicaragua Monitor, the Nicaragua News Service, the Hotline and the web page. Then I discussed the work we did since the last Nicanet national meeting in Santa Cruz, CA, in opposition to CAFTA and water privatization, as well as in support of labor rights and debt relief.

The question after the terrible very close loss on CAFTA in the US Congress then becomes, "What can we do now?" We can keep close watch on the implementation of CAFTA and report on abuses. In fact, the Stop CAFTA Coalition has resolved to stay in existence to do just that and Nicanet will continue to be active in the coalition. The coalition has committed to preparing a report on CAFTA implementation for this coming autumn.

Katherine Stecher, outgoing staff person for Campaign for Labor Rights and Jon Hunt, incoming national coordinator, gave the CLR report. CLR, founded by the Nicaragua Network at our national meeting in December of 1995, has returned to an active and important role in the US anti-sweatshop movement. In February, 2005, Stecher accompanied a speaking tour by Jacqueline Sevilla, a union representative from the Nicotex factory in Sebaco, Nicaragua. That campaign successfully concluded with the reinstatement of the fired union leadership. CLR has launched a new educational campaign about the "Wal-Mart model." As part of the website redesign, CLR has an entire section on Wal-Mart, including news articles, web resources, and printable materials. From the response CLR has received, it appears that this campaign excites activists and donors. The hope is to expand from an educational campaign to an action one, working in coalition with other activist groups that are targeting Wal-Mart and the big box stores. CLR's web page is [www.clrlabor.org](http://www.clrlabor.org).

Chuck Kaufman reported on the Nicaragua Network's role in important coalitions including the Latin American Solidarity Coalition and the ANSWER anti-war coalition. He also explained the leading role the Nicaragua Network has taken in organizing a Venezuela Solidarity Network. He said that, "The Nicaragua Network, recognizing that the Bolivarian Revolution is under threat in Venezuela similar to what the Sandinista Revolution was in Nicaragua, initiated a call for a national conference in Washington, DC March 4-6. An astounding 471 people participated and 49 groups co-sponsored the conference which ended with a decision to form the Venezuela Solidarity Network. At the second meeting of the Interim Steering Committee, the VSN leadership accepted the invitation of Nicaragua Network/Alliance for Global Justice to provide office space, logistics, and fundraising for the new solidarity network. We are now in the process of raising money for a small staff."

Next, this author gave an update on happenings in Nicaragua. I talked about the debt relief which Nicaragua has received from the IMF and World Bank and the recently launched campaign to get the Inter-American Development Bank to cancel the debt of Nicaragua and several other countries. Other important subjects were the approval of CAFTA by the Nicaraguan National Assembly, the state of the struggle against water privatization, the health workers strikes, the Atlantic Coast elections and, of course, the political situation especially with regard to the upcoming national elections. Our special guest from Nicaragua Elvin Castellon supplemented what I was able to say as did the many people in attendance who had recently returned from Nicaragua.

Next on the program was Elvin Castellon, director of the Federation for the Integral Development of Peasant Farmers (FEDICAMP). Castellon was about to begin a speaking tour around the United States sponsored by the Nicaragua Network to increase awareness of the water crisis in Nicaragua and to raise support for the conservation work of FEDICAMP whether monetary or in the form of volunteer work. Castellon explained that the Federation was formed in 2001 by rural farming communities that had worked with the John XXIII Institute and the Quixote Center since 1990 on development projects.

Castellon explained that FEDICAMP works in the Departments of Esteli, Madriz and Nueva Segovia and is composed of associations in 12 communities, including El Regadio, Palacaguina,

San Juan de Limay, Ocotal and Jalapa. The goals of FEDICAMP are to strengthen rural development while respecting the environment as the source of life and to empower the population. He said that the areas of work are in agriculture, small businesses, community organization, health, education, and leadership formation. As part of FEDICAMP's conservation work, the federation has overseen the planting of 1.2 million trees. The organization emphasizes conservation of soils and water and family gardens. Local communities gather the seeds and provide the soil for the nursery and the labor involved in the entire process. Most trees are planted on the banks of rivers and streams. Some trees are planted for fruit and all trees are from seeds that are not only indigenous to Nicaragua but from seeds from the particular community where they are planted. This reforestation has led to an improved flow of water in the streams, improved nutrition in local families and less damaging firewood collecting for homemakers who lower the use of firewood in special stove that burns less wood.

FEDICAMP, Castellon said, is now beginning a project of constructing underground cisterns which store the rain that drains off of the roofs of family dwellings. This will be of tremendous help to families during the dry season in the departments where FEDICAMP works because many families have enormous difficulty finding water during that period. The combination, he emphasized, between planting trees to revive streams and collecting rain water is making a difference in the lives of people in these northern communities. For more information, contact the Nicanet office.

When asked about how solidarity groups and individuals could help, Castellon replied that they can help support conservation and other projects in FEDICAMP communities with monetary donations and can themselves come to help the communities in reforestation work, whether putting soil and seeds in plastic bags or planting small trees in the ground, depending on the season.

This writer followed up with a few words about the current status of the struggle to stop water privatization in Nicaragua. The "modernization" by a company from Chile of the state-owned water and sewerage company ENACAL financed by a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank, which we helped lead an international campaign to stop last year, has gone forward. This type of "modernization" imposed by the international lending institutions always leads to privatization. The general water law, which our partners in Nicaragua say is "innovative but not perfect" is stalled in the National Assembly.

Following lunch, there was a presentation by a panel of representatives of sister communities about the challenges and rewards of their work and then a general discussion of what the Nicaragua Network can do to assist the groups following the 2005 sister city conference in Managua. John Brentlinger of the Solentiname Nicaragua Friendship Group spoke of the problems that occur in communities when some groups won't work with others and the question of how to decide which development projects should receive the benefits of the sale of the work of local artists and artisans. Brentlinger asked for the Nicaragua Network to give more coverage to cultural issues in its publications and possibly organize a speaking tour of cultural workers. He also thought that a handbook of solidarity organizations would be helpful.

Tim Jeffries of the Bend (OR) - Condega Sister City Project stated that the problem of obtaining visas for visitors from Nicaragua has gotten worse and that we need to continue to work on it. There are also often export and import questions to resolve. Sister city projects have the problem of maintaining interest locally and involving new people. Personal relationships are more important than aid, he said, adding that what we are doing is solidarity, not charity.

Barbara Larcom of Casa Baltimore-Limay added that in Limay they have had to make a choice between working with civil society people or government people. She noted that there has been a great deal of migration out of San Juan de Limay, much of it to the United States. Nicanet could help with an on-line bulletin board for activists and more accessible links to Nicaraguan groups on the Nicanet web page

Castellon suggested that the Nicaragua Network try to do new match-ups with cities and towns in northern Nicaragua which FEDICAMP could help facilitate. Jeffries suggested that Nicanet could offer advice on how to make the relationship official based on experience of Nicanet sistering committees. Magda Enriquez suggested that groups try to get articles in their local press about sister city activities as the press is usually desperate to get human interest stories.

The attendees at the meeting then boarded cars to travel to Brentwood, MD, for a festive dinner with music and speeches to celebrate anniversaries of Quest for Peace and the Quixote Center as a whole. In his tribute, Nicanet co-coordinator Chuck Kaufman said, "The Nicaragua Network owes a debt of gratitude to our friends at the Quixote Center, particularly the Quest for Peace. We're honored to be included in this 20th anniversary celebration for the Quest and 30th anniversary for the Quixote Center. Bill Callahan taught us the meaning of 'bold dreaming.' We've benefited from Dolly's fundraising advice, both the Tom's analytical skills, and the practical vision for many years of Ellen, who has departed this world, and now Carol. And, although Maureen is no longer part of the Quest, I remember her oratory skills at the many anti-contra aid rallies. They are our friends as well as our colleagues."

Sunday began with breakfast followed by the financial report and discussion. Chuck Kaufman reported that 2005 was a tough year for the Nicaragua Network. Fundraising fell off because of the Asian tsunami at the end of 2004 and then Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We had to close our office in Managua and eliminate one staff position in Washington. The future looks much brighter for 2006, Kaufman said, thanks to the continued loyalty of our donors.

Elections for the Nicaragua Network Executive Committee were held at which Donna Leist, Shelly Scribner, Tim Jeffries, and Tom Baker were re-elected. Scribner, who was not able to be present at the meeting, is a member of the Merced-Somoto Sister City Project of Merced, CA.

Orin Langelle of the Global Justice Ecology Project showed the film "A Silent Forest: The Growing Threat of Genetically Engineered Trees" which detailed the dangerous impacts genetically engineered trees would have on human health, native forests, forest-dwelling indigenous peoples, and wildlife if allowed to be planted in Nicaragua and other countries.

After lunch at the Banana Café not far from the Seminar Center, there were tributes to this author, Barbara Larcom, and Katherine Stecher. Magda Enriquez read a very nice tribute to me from the FSLN which, I realized, was prepared when I was expecting to retire on February 1st but moved forward in spite of my spectacular recovery from surgery and return to full-time work! Larcom served on staff for a year and received kudos for bringing about the wonderfully successful Sister Communities Conference in Managua last July. She will continue to serve on the Nicanet Executive Committee. Stecher, who began as an intern a few months after her college graduation in 2003, was applauded for bringing Campaign for Labor Rights back from the doldrums to an active and leading role in the anti-sweatshop movement. She will be heading off to Spain in a few weeks. Jon Hunt was welcomed to the staff as the new coordinator of CLR. Hunt is an activist and journalist who was born in Panama and has served time in jail for crossing the line at the School of the Americas.

The next discussion was about interference by the US government in the upcoming Nicaraguan election, scheduled for November. Ambassador Trivelli has been intervening to attempt to force the right to unite before the elections in order to prevent a victory by the left and has made it clear that the only government with which the United States will have cordial relations is one that, as he said, "has a reasonable economic policy and is ready to cooperate with us." By this he means a government must support CAFTA, follow US instructions on all military matters, and not have cordial relations with Cuba or Venezuela. The Nicaragua Network, Quest for Peace and the Ecumenical Committee in Nicaragua have joined forces to counter the US intervention with exposure by means of a continuous information flow, letter writing, delegations to Nicaragua, space in the Nicaraguan media and other activities. The Nicaraguan people have the right to choose their own officials independent of outside intervention. The first delegation to Nicaragua is planned for June 17-24.

The gathering of member committees decided that the Nicanet meeting should mandate the writing of a resolution denouncing the interference of their government in the electoral process of Nicaragua. Those present also suggested that a press statement be released to the Nicaraguan media about the resolution. [See Resolution on this page. The press release was covered by the Managua newspaper El Nuevo Diario.]

Chuck Kaufman explained, in what was the last substantive item on the agenda, the structure of the Nicaragua Network and how Nicanet relates to the Campaign for Labor Rights and the Alliance for Global Justice. Legally, the Alliance for Global Justice is the umbrella organization of which Nicaragua Network is a project along with Campaign for Labor Rights and the recently formed Venezuela Solidarity Network. The basic structure is that we have an AfGJ corporate board that sets overall direction and administrative policy. Then we have three projects each of which have their own bodies that decide program priorities.

Before ending the National Leadership Meeting, the decision had to be made about the date and place of the next meeting! Staff proposed holding another conference in Managua in July 2007 that would also be a National Leadership Meeting of the Nicaragua Network. This proposal was discussed in some detail and met with general approval. The staff and executive committee were charged with working out the details. Good-byes were said as folks headed for home or the airport.