

# Month In Review

*(Compiled from Nicaragua Network Hotlines May 26-June 9, 2009)*

## **Sugar & Banana Workers**



*Former sugar workers carrying the banner of the UITA.*

Manipulating workers' fear for their jobs in light of an international boycott of Nicaragua's famed Flor de Caña rum, Carlos Pellas, president of Nicaragua's largest business group, signed an accord with three of the country's major labor federations which "guarantees" jobs for the more than 7,000 workers at the National Liquor Company and Nicaragua Sugar Estates, Ltd. in exchange for the unions criticizing the International Union of Food Workers (UITA) which is working on behalf of former workers poisoned on the Pellas sugar plantations. The unions include the Sandinista Workers Central (CST), the Confederation of Union Unity (CUS), and the Autonomous Confederation of Union Unity (CUS-A). Chronic renal insufficiency (CRI) has killed several thousand sugar workers in recent years. Survivors and their widows have been camped in downtown Managua for several months demanding negotiations with Pellas.

The Nicaraguan Workers Front (FNT), like the CST a Sandinista federation, strongly condemned the three unions for supporting the Pellas Group. The FNT said that it was a "vile action to put a brake on the claims of hundreds of workers who suffer from chronic renal insufficiency as a result of the indiscriminate use of agricultural toxins, the application of which is banned internationally because of their impact on human health."

[For more on this story and the former banana workers setback in US court as well as their victory in Venezuelan court, see separate stories in this issue.]

## **Agriculture & Trade**

Two hundred and fifty small farmers in the Department of Carazo planted 870 acres of black beans, all for export to Venezuela, and the national cattle industry will export 1,100 head of cattle there as well this month, part of the Ortega government's efforts to find new markets under the Bolivarian Alternative for Our Americas (ALBA) cooperative fair trade agreement. The black beans were planted under contract with Nicaragua Food, Inc. (ALBALINISA), which made a commitment to purchase all that was produced. The cattle shipment was part of an agreement to export 5,500 head to Venezuela.

Small farmers received 80 pounds of seed and 200 pounds of fertilizer and technical assistance which enabled them to produce 1,437 pounds of beans per acre cultivated. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAGFOR) now plans to expand the program to 17,400 acres, all for export under ALBA to Venezuela.

Nicaragua's cattle industry has generated US\$11 million under ALBA, according to National Assembly Deputy Douglas Aleman. That is expected to rise by the end of the year. Aleman also said that

6,000 tons of beef will be shipped to Venezuela in July as part of the ALBA agreements. He said that he expected that in the coming weeks a second accord will be signed to raise the amount of beef exported to Venezuela to 12,000 tons.



*The IICA named Nicaragua and Chile as having the most dynamic agricultural sectors in the Americas.*

Aleman also said that the proposed Law for the Promotion of the Dairy Sector will, among other things, establish that all children under 12 years old should have a glass of milk a day in school. The law is expected to easily pass the legislature.

The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, headquartered in Costa Rica, named Nicaragua and Chile as having the most dynamic agricultural sectors in the Americas. IICA Director Gerardo Escudero said that the increase of 5% in the production of food that Nicaragua has achieved is something that few countries in the world have matched in the present economic crisis. He added that a

successful model must be sustainable, incorporate knowledge and technology, and include the small and medium farmers. “We have to rise out of the ashes of the urban industrial model that made us poor and look again at the countryside,” Escudero said. He also noted the increased participation of women in agriculture saying that women have taken over the responsibility of much of the region’s food production.

The Food and Agriculture Organization said that Nicaragua is the country in Central America that has achieved the most in the fight against hunger, having lowered its percentage of malnourished from 52% to 22%. FAO representative in Nicaragua Dr. Gero Vaagt said, “The government of Nicaragua gives great importance to food and nutritional security which is reflected in the efforts it has made on the national level with small farmers, poor peasants, and the most vulnerable population of the country, to improve their food situation.” Among the government programs he mentioned were Zero Hunger, school nutrition programs, the infant malnutrition eradication program, and the National Food Program which seeks to increase food production by improving seeds. Although recent figures show that Nicaragua continues to have the most problems with nutrition in the region, Vaagt said Nicaragua has more policies to guarantee its citizens food security. Nicaragua shows a drop of 30% in food insecurity, compared to an increase of 2% in Guatemala.

Food production should improve even more since the new Production Promotion Bank is getting underway with National Assembly approval of Sandinista Gustavo Picado Moreno board president and a former attorney for the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), Orestes Romero Rojas, as vice-president. The other members of the board will be named by President Daniel Ortega and will include a representative each from the government, the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG), and the Nicaraguan Union of Producers (UPANIC). They will have to be confirmed by the National Assembly. The bank will begin operations with an initial capital of US\$54.4 million and it is hoped that it may be able to help finance the second planting this year which will begin in September.

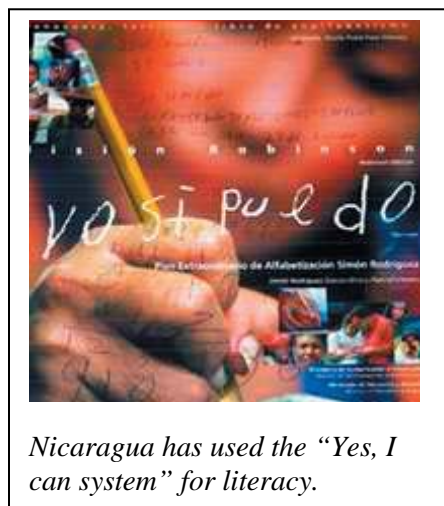
## **Social Investment**

On Friday, May 29 the Ortega government, working with the Commission of Verification, Reconciliation, Peace and Justice, headed by Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, announced it is giving 100,000 sheets of galvanized roofing to demobilized combatants in 97 municipalities, benefiting 10,000 families of the demobilized from the 1980s for a total of 50,000 beneficiaries. On the same day, Ortega handed out 3,119 property titles to women in honor of Nicaragua's Mothers Day.

The roofing materials were given out as part of "Plan Roof" to improve housing for the poor by investing economic resources, in this case, over US\$2 million, adding to a program on the Atlantic Coast for demobilized YATAMA indigenous rebels who received 7,000 sheets of roofing, and on the Pacific side of the country where 8,000 people received 17,000 galvanized sheets.

The Peace Commission also distributed hundreds of uniforms, backpacks, and school supplies to prepare students for school in accordance to the policy of the Ortega government that everyone must have the benefit of an education. The Social Security Institute has also approved 400 pensions and made 342 loans to widows and disabled fighters. The government has also donated 30 wheelchairs, 112 prostheses, 50 canes, dental work and a considerable number of caskets.

On the eve of Mothers Day, President Ortega handed out 3,119 property titles to women which the government described as a continuation of the Rural and Urban Land Reform Program of the 1980s. Ortega recognized that, during the years of the Sandinista revolution, they handed out property without properly recording the titles, leaving thousands of families insecure in their property ownership during the 1990s and subject to eviction by the previous owners. Since returning to office, the Ortega government has registered 29,750 property titles benefitting 148,750 people.



A total of 88 municipalities will be free of illiteracy by the end of May according to Reynaldo Mariena. Mariena is the General Director of Literacy and Education of Youth and Adults of the Ministry of Education (MINED). He said that the "Marti to Fidel" Literacy Campaign is in its seventh phase with the record registration of 91,000. He expects a retention rate of 90%. On the Atlantic Coast citizens are being taught to read in their own languages including Miskito, Mayagna, and Creole. Education Minister Miguel de Castilla reiterated Nicaragua's confidence that it will become the fourth country in Latin America to become illiteracy free. Nicaragua implemented the Literacy Campaign with the help of Cuba and Venezuela as part of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). MINED projects that nationally illiteracy will stand at 4.3% by June 30, a victory for the Ortega government.

On May 23 the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) inaugurated a National Cleanup Day with the objective of eliminating trash and litter from the roadways of all the municipalities of the country. Vice-Minister Roberto Araquistain said that the major challenge is to make people understand that they shouldn't throw their trash on the ground, especially plastic bags, which are the largest component of litter in the environment. Councils of Citizen Power, volunteers, students and employees of city offices participated in the clean-up, according to the vice-minister.

Araquistain said, "It is not like before when we drank from glass containers." he "Now we use plastic bags, and that has created the enormous quantities of plastic bags which contaminate the environment and the landscape. It is terrible."



In other environmental news, Central America could have more biodiversity than previously believed, as Nicaragua, the largest country with the most extensive protected areas, only now begins a species inventory. Nicaragua has had no clear understanding of its natural resources. But, thanks to US\$8.4 million in support from Spain to open biological laboratories in the SIAPAZ nature reserve which includes the Rio San Juan, Indo Maiz and Southeast, as well as in the Bosawas Biological Reserve in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region, it can now do a comprehensive census.

## Political Issues

Opposition groups marched without incident in Masaya on June 7 to protest alleged fraud in last November's municipal elections and to demand the removal of magistrates of the Supreme Electoral Council. Because a Sandinista march was announced for the same day, there were fears of violent encounters similar to those that have taken place in the past, but the fears proved unfounded.



*Opposition groups, many funded by the NED and USAID, not only oppose President Ortega (here the caiman headed for Venezuela as in the song) but also Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Bolivian President Evo Morales..*

At the Sandinista rally, the 30th anniversary of the death of eleven young people in Masaya during the final offensive of the 1979 revolution was commemorated and Education Minister Miguel de Castilla officially declared Masaya free of illiteracy. Membership cards in the Sandinista Party were handed out to new members as part of a national campaign to build membership.

The opposition march was organized by the Union of Citizens for Democracy, a coalition of 16 groups. Benjamin Lugo of the Movement for Nicaragua, a group created and funded by the US International Republican Institute, calculated that some 4,000 people attended. Politicians such as losing presidential and Managua mayoral candidate, Eduardo Montealegre, and Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) leader Edmundo Jarquin attended the march. The Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC) which maintains an "on again, off again" pact with the Sandinista Party did not participate.

Also on the agenda for many groups was concern over the leaked draft of government regulations of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which would establish that international

NGOs with a presence in Nicaragua "must abstain from any participation in political activities of a partisan character." Specific activities of Nicaraguan NGOs that are funded by international groups must not be political in nature either. The US regulates NGOs in a very similar manner. Nicaraguan Democratic Bench member, Maria Eugenia Sequeira, said that this prohibition constitutes a "blockade" of democracy. She said that, "More than ever, now that we have a dictatorial government, we need the support of friendly countries to promote democracy among our people." Jarquin of the MRS called Ortega's government "a low intensity dictatorship" and said that it "is invading all the spheres of life." Montealegre said that the regulations are a blow against democracy and part of "a pattern that is being followed in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia and now they want to implement it here and in Honduras."

While the Nicaragua Network is not surprised that the “bought and paid for” Nicaraguan right-wing supports US intervention in Nicaragua’s internal affairs, it is disappointing to hear former revolutionaries such as Jarquin echo the calls in favor of foreign electoral manipulation.

Javier Melendez, director of the Institute for Strategic Studies and Public Policies, said that the manual, if put into effect, would mean that “organizations such as the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) of the US or any other organization would not be able to train members of the political parties in leadership, transparency in the public sector or any other related subject.” He questioned, “With this restriction, will these organizations have to cancel their operations in Nicaragua?”

Let us hope so. The reason the measures are needed in the first place is because the main weapon of US “regime change” strategies, especially in Latin America, is the use of so called “democracy building” programs to fund and train right-wing opposition parties and even coup fomenters. Whether the regulations are ultimately judged good or bad depends on how the government defines “political.” NGO participation in electoral politics is strictly forbidden in the US, as it will now be in Nicaragua. However, if restrictions are placed on public policy advocacy, such as abortion rights, then it will have a chilling effect on Nicaraguan democracy.



*Women demanded that the Supreme Court rule on the constitutionality of the criminalization of therapeutic abortion.*

More than 500 women protested in front of the Supreme Court on May 28 demanding that the Court rule immediately on two petitions of unconstitutionality against the law that criminalized therapeutic abortion in 2006 ending a right that had existed since 1893. The rally was led by the Network of Women against Violence with the participation of the Feminist Movement, the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), and the Strategic Group for the Decriminalization of Therapeutic Abortion. Vilma Nuñez of CENIDH said that the government was holding up the ruling in order to get the Catholic Church to sit down at the table for a dialogue on unrelated political issues.

The women blamed the Court for deaths of mothers who have not received needed attention in the nation’s hospitals and have died from complications of pregnancies. Virginia Meneses of the Network of Women against Violence, said that according to international organizations, over 1,000 girls were raped in Nicaragua since the law was passed and those who became pregnant were obliged to carry those babies to term.

None of the justices met with the women unlike their expressed willingness to meet with the Catholic bishops. Ruben Montenegro, secretary of the Court, said that a draft of the ruling on the issue exists but he would not say whether it ruled against or in favor of the criminalization of therapeutic abortion.

Maria Teresa Blandon of the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua said that the women wanted the Court, before it issued its ruling, to meet with a delegation from the women’s movement and from the Association of Gynecologists and Obstetricians. “We reminded the justices,” Blandon said, “that they must act according to the law, independent of their personal beliefs, because that is what the Constitution of the Republic demands.”

Nicaraguan Attorney General Julio Centeno Gomez said last week that the accusations against 39 people involved in the bank failures of 2000 and the subsequent issuing of the now infamous Negotiable Investment Certificates (CENIs) were supported by substantial evidence. The failed banks resulted in a



*Eduardo Montealegre, former candidate for president and Managua mayor, faces charges for malfeasance when he was Minister of the Treasury.*

loss to the Nicaraguan state of US\$600 million. The architect of the bailout was former presidential and Managua mayoral candidate Eduardo Montealegre, one of the 39 accused of fraud. “We did not act based on any political criteria,” Centeno said. While the indictments were handed down in July of 2008, all of those indicted are free and the person most responsible [referring to Montealegre] uses his legislative immunity to enjoy what he took from the people, according to Centeno.

Then on June 1, Constitutional Liberal Deputy Jose Pallais said that his party had received an invitation from Montealegre to work to create “chaos” in the country to get the Sandinista Party to accept the candidates that the opposition wants for positions on the Supreme Court, the Supreme Electoral Council, the Superintendent of Banks, and the Human Rights Ombudsman. Rather than condemning the invitation as traitorous, Pallais cynically said that the PLC reacted “prudently, because we have not evaluated if a crisis is to our advantage, who would win and who would lose.” He went on to say, “We can’t act irrationally;

the PLC needs to consult with all sectors.”

## **International Relations**

[See separate story in this issue on US and European aid suspension.]

Foreign Minister Samuel Santos and Prosecutor General Hernan Estrada met with US Ambassador to Nicaragua Robert Callahan to review progress in compensation to US citizens for loss of property during the revolution of the 1980s. Auxiliadora Rayo, spokeswoman for the prosecutor’s office, said that the government had favorably resolved 33 claims of US citizens during the previous (US) fiscal year. Those were claims filed during Violeta Chamorro’s presidency.

Estrada told Callahan that there were 52 claims on that list from people who, after 15 years, had not presented the required documents. Estrada proposed that they be purged. Estrada also explained that the remaining names were of Nicaraguans, now US citizens, who were officers in the National Guard or members of the Somoza family. He noted that not even the previous governments viewed those claims as valid.

In order to receive economic assistance from the United States, the Nicaraguan government each year must show “progress” in resolving pending property disputes resulting from Nicaraguans who left the country to live in the United States, became US citizens, and then claimed compensation based on US law on property confiscated from US citizens. Some of the property was foreclosed when the previous owners mortgaged the property, took the money to the US, and never made payments on their loans. Some was taken for agrarian reform, which the FSLN acknowledges was sometimes abused. And some was taken from supporters of the Somoza dictatorship and the Somoza family who had gained it by illegitimate means. Estrada said that since 1994, the Nicaraguan government has paid out US\$1.228 million in compensation.

The US government makes the decision as to whether progress has been made on property claims each July. Estrada said that last year the decision was favorable based on the resolution of 40 cases. He said that he hoped that the decision would be favorable this year as well, as the list gets down to cases that are more difficult to resolve.

On May 20 a mission from the International Monetary Fund began a two week visit to evaluate revisions to the IMF-approved 2007 economic program. The fact that Nicaragua has registered an inflation rate of zero for the first quarter of 2009 and maintained its level of international reserves above the required level means that the government can count on the approval by the IMF of its economic policies, according to independent economist Nestor Avendaño.