

# Nicanet Regional Meeting Covers a Lot of Ground

By Chuck Kaufman

[Kaufman is National Co-Coordinator of the Nicaragua Network.]

The Oct. 16-18, 2009 Nicaragua Network regional conference in Baltimore, MD, brought together over 50 Nicaragua solidarity activists from Maine to Georgia and west to Chicago. Hosted by the Casa Baltimore/Limay sister city committee, the conference featured Nicaraguan Ambassador Magda Enriquez; the grandson of Augusto C. Sandino, Walter Castillo Sandino; a delegation from San Juan de Limay, Nicaragua; and Nicaragua's most famous reggae singer/songwriter, Philip Montalban from Bluefields.

The meeting was held in the Baltimore office of ACORN in solidarity with the nation's largest, most effective poor people's organization which has been under withering assault by Fox News and right-wing forces. Feedback from participants was universally enthusiastic about the quality of the presentations and discussion at the conference.



Ambassador Enriquez (left)  
converses with Prof. Angelica  
Gonzalez from San Juan de Limay.  
Photo: Dave Schott

Ambassador Enriquez, who served as senior assistant to Fr. Miguel D'Escoto in his role as President of the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly which ended in September, detailed the many initiatives, successes and challenges of Fr. D'Escoto's use of the UN "bully pulpit" to restore balance in the UN which has seen power consolidated in the Security Council at the expense of the General Assembly. Enriquez said, "Fr. Miguel firmly believes politics is the art of the possible, but he dreams of the impossible, and tries to do both."

Enriquez said that the global financial crisis forced them to concentrate on economic issues because it is the Global South that always pays the price for the economic mistakes of the rich countries. She said the G-8 and the G-20 aren't going to admit that they caused the problem. D'Escoto pushed the concept of

the Group of 192, which is the membership of the UN, as the appropriate place to set world economic policies. As a result of the economic conference called by D'Escoto in June, a team of economic experts has continued as part of the General Assembly structure even after his tenure in the presidency ended.

Enriquez said that reforming the political governance of the UN was an even greater challenge where the UN President receives no salary or housing and has an office budget of only \$260,000. She said that the countries on the Security Council believe that they run the world. Efforts to reform the membership of the Security Council to reflect today's world, rather than the world that existed at the close of WWII, have not gone anywhere over many years. Under D'Escoto's presidency they held 32 intergovernmental working group meetings on reforming the Security Council. They did not resolve the many intractable problems but succeeded in winning agreement that the meetings would continue under the same leadership so that, unlike previous efforts, they will not start over from scratch with the new UN President.

She noted that Fr. Miguel involved himself in many global issues including women, Israel-Palestine, human trafficking, and education of children; he even was on the plane with deposed Honduran President Zelaya when his first attempt to return to Honduras was thwarted by the Honduran military blocking the airport runway.

Asked if D'Escoto's term as UN General Assembly President had enhanced the image of the FSLN in Nicaragua, Enriquez responded, "No. Around the world, yes, but in Nicaragua the press is controlled by the opposition. If we do ten things, eight of them good and two not so good, the bad will get big coverage and the good will be ignored."

In the next plenary session, Nicanet National Co-Coordinator Chuck Kaufman gave a short history of the Nicaragua Network and appealed for committees to become dues-paying members as a symbol of their desire to have a national network. He noted that Nicaragua Network is nearly 31 years old and called that a “remarkable accomplishment.” He noted that Nicanet will undergo its first major staff transition in a number of years with the January semi-retirement of fellow Co-Coordinator Katherine Hoyt and said it is coming in the “worst economic crisis we have faced” as a network. “What your priorities are for us will be very important as we consider how to divide up essential tasks because we cannot replace Kathy with a full-time staffer at the present time.”

Kaufman also reiterated Nicaragua Network’s position not to involve itself in internal debates within Sandinismo. “Those issues are for Nicaraguans, and Nicaraguans alone to resolve,” he said. He noted that our responsibility is to prevent “our government’s intervention” in Nicaragua.

Kaufman spent most of his presentation explaining the new Nicaragua Network campaign to get Nicaragua out from under the US requirement that it resolve property claims by US citizens whose property was confiscated during the 1980’s. Failure to do so would trigger a US law requiring a cut-off of aid. The majority of claims that have not already been resolved are those from criminals including the Somoza family and high-ranking officers of the brutal National Guard. “Not even the preceding right-wing governments were willing to resolve those,” he said.



*Chuck Kaufman’s talk was followed by that of Limay lawyer Edwin M. Corea (on right). Photo: Dave Schott.*

Kaufman said that removing the threat of cutoffs of aid and multilateral loans would require either a change in US law or a declaration by the Obama administration that Nicaragua has met its “obligations” under the law. “Whatever route we take,” Kaufman said, “it will require that hundreds or thousands of people call, write, and email their elected representatives and the State Department, and for that we need your strong support.”

Edwin M. Corea, a lawyer in San Juan de Limay and member of the delegation visiting Baltimore followed Kaufman and thanked the Nicaragua Network for its solidarity and Casa Baltimore/Limay for its 24 years sistering with his home town. Corea delivered a spirited defense of the FSLN government of President Daniel Ortega. He said, “The revolution is defending solidarity but protecting against outside groups that are trying to

impose models that have nothing to do with us; our history and culture.”

Corea talked about participatory democracy as seen from Limay, which has a Sandinista mayor. He said that sixteen communities in Limay have a Council of Citizen Power (CPC) which represents the needs of the community to the mayor’s office. “Who knows better about the problems of the community than the people themselves?” he asked. Responding to a question, he said that where there is not a Sandinista mayor, there aren’t CPCs.

He cited the many poverty reduction and development programs of the Sandinista government such as Houses for the People, Streets for the People, free healthcare and education, Zero Hunger, Zero Usury, and titling of property. He said, “Many people can’t take advantage of government programs because they can’t prove ownership.” He is working on a local commission to find the documents and legalize property ownership. He said that in Limay, the only organization they can count on without regard to legalized property is Casa Baltimore/Limay.

One of the participants remarked, “In Nicaragua they are trying to do what was done in Cuba, but in a democratic manner. That’s incredible.”

The conference then broke into three workshops. Jennifer Atlee, of the Quixote Center’s Quest for Peace, discussed the Honduras coup as an example of the US and right-wing push-back against progress for social and economic justice in Latin America, and what we all can do to support grassroots democratic movements. Another workshop, led by Maria Gabriela Aldana from Maryland Institute College of Art, surveyed “new media” including web pages, blogs, and social networking as a way to reach new people and expand our work. She also provided resources on video making and editing. Hugo Lam, a

Nicaraguan water and forestation expert currently working for Baltimore City, conducted the third workshop, discussing water projects in the US and Nicaragua.

The final plenary of the day was led by Melinda St. Louis, deputy director of Jubilee USA. St. Louis



*With Melinda St. Louis of the Jubilee USA Network the group participated in the global “Stand-Up, Take Action, End Poverty Now!” actions. Photo: Marek Bennett*

began her career as an organizer with the Campaign for Labor Rights, which along with the Nicaragua Network is part of the Alliance for Global Justice. She noted that Nicaragua Network was among the original US groups to work for debt relief for the Global South and is a member of Jubilee USA’s 75-organization alliance.

St. Louis called our attention to the fact that we were meeting during the Oct. 16-18 global “Stand-Up, Take Action, End Poverty Now” actions to demand that governments meet the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate extreme poverty. She led participants in the pledge which allowed us to become part of a new Guinness World Record as the largest mobilization of human beings in recorded history --173,045,325 citizens gathered at over 3,000 events in more than 120 countries, an increase of

about 57 million people over last year's action.

St. Louis said that the Millennium Development Goals are “pretty lame in terms of the changes we want to see, but are an important institutional framework” and that most of the world isn’t even meeting these minimal goals. She noted that 2007 statistics for Nicaragua were that 45.1% lived on less than \$1/day and that 75-80% lived on less than \$2/day. She mentioned that she travelled there recently and was astounded at how expensive food prices are. “They are magicians to live on that,” she said. “Survival is an act of resistance.”

She said that the G-20 promised \$50 billion to meet the Millennium Development Goals when they met in April. They had delivered half by the September meeting in Pittsburgh. “But almost 100% is in the form of new loans. We are just talking about creating a new debt crisis,” St. Louis said adding that there was no mention of the \$50 billion in the September meeting.

She did say that the movement for debt relief has made limited but real policy changes. She said, “When we went to the IMF in the 1990s and linked poverty to debt, they said, ‘That’s crazy, they owe us money. Debt cancellation is impossible.’” She noted that by 1999 the multilateral lending institutions were forced to recognize the link and set up the Heavily Indebted, Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, flawed as it was. In 2005, the G-8 acknowledged the link between poverty and debt and promised 100% debt relief to 43 countries. She added, however, that \$100 million per day still flows from South to North for debt payments.

St. Louis said that Nicaragua, the 10<sup>th</sup> country to meet the HIPC requirements for debt cancellation, shows both the benefits and the flaws of the HIPC model. In 2004 the World Bank and IMF cancelled Nicaragua’s multilateral debt and the Paris Club of rich countries followed suit with their bilateral debt thus dropping Nicaragua’s debt from \$6.7 billion to \$2.4 billion and freeing money for poverty reduction programs. However, Nicaragua still pays \$100 million a year in debt service and conditions on new loans still require wage caps and structural adjustment conditions.

She said that Jubilee is working to pressure the Obama administration in 2010 to announce a New Deal on Debt. They want Obama to expand debt cancellation and to change loan conditions as well as to conduct “debt audits” to determine which loans are “odious debt” used to support dictatorships or for corruption or failed projects that should never have received a loan.

She asked the group's support for two bills in Congress. The first is the Jubilee Act for debt cancellation. "It doesn't do everything," she said, "but it is the most progressive bill in the world and it has bipartisan support." It passed the House with a two-thirds vote last year but an Oklahoma Senator prevented it from being voted on in the Senate. It is being reintroduced this year.

The second bill for which she asked support is the Stop Vulture Funds Act. Hedge funds bought, at reduced prices, debt that had been loaned to poor countries and which they couldn't pay. Some of Nicaragua's debt, for instance, was bought for five cents to the dollar. When countries receive debt cancellation, these hedge funds sue to recover the full value of the debt they hold, arguing that now the countries can afford to pay. The proposed law would prevent them pursuing from their claims in US courts.



*Nicaraguan reggae singer/songwriter Philip Montalban is joined by Maria Aldana. Photo: Dave Schott.*

Saturday evening conference participants and the public enjoyed a spirited concert at Johns Hopkins University by Nicaragua's premiere reggae singer/songwriter Philip Montalban. Montalban performed in Miskito, Spanish, and English before the dancing, clapping, toe tapping crowd.

Sunday morning and over the lunch hour, participants were mesmerized by the presentation of Walter Castillo Sandino, youngest grandchild of the "General of Free Men," Augusto Cesar Sandino. We were fortunate that a technology glitch in the morning session prevented Castillo from showing his 300 slides, many with never before published photos of Sandino, because the problem was solved by lunch time and virtually the entire group of participants ate their lunch while viewing the slides and

listening to another hour about the remarkable leader from whom the Sandinistas took their name.

Castillo pointed out that in not one of the hundreds of pictures of Sandino is there one in which he is smiling. He had a hard early life as the out-of-wedlock son of a rich man in Niquinomo. His mother was sent to prison when he was nine and he accompanied her where he was brutalized and where he had to deliver his stillborn brother. When he was 10 his mother abandoned him. He walked the streets of Nicinomo publicly demanding that his father claim him. He caused his father to weep and to take him home – as a servant. At a young age he became manager of all his father's properties. After killing a man who cheated him in business, he went into exile, eventually becoming relatively wealthy as manager of an American company in Mexico, where he learned about imperialism. He returned to Nicaragua with his money and discovered that Nicaragua, under the occupation of US Marines, had not changed. As Castillo said, "Nicaraguan lives were worth less than the lives of dogs to the American occupiers."



*Walter Castillo Sandino (right) inspired the audience with the story of his grandfather Augusto Sandino. With him is interpreter Mark Chalkley. Photo: Dave Schott*

When he went to northern Nicaragua to fight the Americans with his first 29 followers, Castillo said his grandfather invested \$5,000 of his own money, a time at which an ounce of gold cost \$20. "Now we see people calling themselves Sandinistas taking money out of the cause," Castillo said.

"Who wrote the most about Sandino in the 1980s?" Castillo asked. "Sergio Ramirez. Where is he now? In the opposition. Now the revolution knows who are the true Sandinistas," according to Castillo.

Castillo praised the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our Americas (ALBA) and noted that the ALBA countries were meeting that weekend to replace what Sandino called "the cursed dollar which has only brought suffering to our people" with a new currency called the Sucre. He said that Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales have taken Sandino's theories and turned them into practice.

Castillo said that Sandino is known throughout the world. When Mao's Red Army entered Peking, they were carrying a banner of Sandino. He said the Vietnamese struggling against the US occupation of their country knew well Sandino's words. Castillo said his grandfather was crazy, "crazy with love." He said, "In 1930 you had to be crazy to fight against the greatest empire in the world and believe you could win. But history has proved him right. One people, one flag. It's just a matter of time," Castillo said in closing.



*Hugo Lam discussed water projects in the U.S. and Nicaragua. Photo: Dave Schott.*

Sunday's second plenary was a presentation about immigration/emigration by Gustavo Andrade, organizing director of Casa de Maryland, and San Juan de Limay resident Angelica Gonzalez. Andrade said, "I carry a lot of anger, because if you are not angry, you're not paying attention." He said there is no more important work right now than immigrant rights in the US. He said that there are millions and millions of immigrants here. "That's a lot of power," he said. "They don't need our help; they need us to get out of the way." He called guest worker proposals a "non-starter" because any program that ties a worker's right to stay in the country to an employer is a recipe for exploitation and abuse.

Andrade said that with Obama and the Democrats in control of Congress, "you'd think we could make something happen, but we can't," citing the administration's preoccupation with health care reform and the financial crisis. He said that Congressman Luis Gutierrez has the best immigration reform bill, describing it as "the most progressive bill we could hope to pass."

Andrade warned that the Tea Party people are already gearing up for the immigration fight. He said, "We need to be as passionate as they are. Passion trumps intelligence every time on the TV screen." He said he personally has made a decision not to let their shouting go unanswered and said that even if the television image is just us shouting back at them, that is an improvement over ceding the television coverage to them alone.

The second speaker in the session, Angelica Gonzalez, told the story of emigration based on her experience in San Juan de Limay. She said, "It starts when the migrant leaves their family. They sell everything they have and often borrow money they cannot repay." For a long time the family has no contact and doesn't know if they are dead or alive. If they do get to the US and get a job, they usually buy a piece of property back home. "But in this economy, when they lose their job in the United States, they have to sell their property to pay for their day to day survival." She also said that for the children left behind by the migrant parent, the money they send home is a mixed blessing. "It allows them to buy things like tennis shoes and a cell phone, but then others in the community say, 'Oh, he thinks he's a gringo.'" When the parent returns home, they discover they've "lost" their children. Couples split up because of the strain of separation.

Gonzalez said that many people from the Limay area now are migrating to Panama and El Salvador. It is hard to get jobs in Costa Rica and the cost of going to the US is \$10,000 and putting your life at risk.

The next plenary, discussing problems of solidarity work, revolved around two issues. First whether the reform to the tax law Nicaragua is currently considering will have an impact on solidarity aid. A lot of discussion involved whether the Nicaragua Network should ask legislators for any special consideration concerning solidarity aid. For every point that was raised, the group realized that universalizing it to include proselytizing churches and other so-called solidarity groups, would make it something we couldn't recommend. In the end we decided that the Nicaragua Network should simply inform Nicaraguan legislators of the history of solidarity aid and ask them to take our contribution into consideration. Walter Castillo said that our worry was unfounded. "The government depends on solidarity aid," he said. "They are not going to tax you."

The second issue was weighing the relative merits of carrying humanitarian aid down to Nicaragua as opposed to buying the materials there. Nearly every group participating in the conference had spent time

locally considering this issue. A majority of the groups present have a policy of “buying Nicaraguan” in order to stimulate the local economy. Some participants said they buy in Nicaragua if the materials are not more expensive than in the US and others noted that some things like books are available in the US or Mexico but not in Nicaragua. The group agreed that this is an issue that needs to be thought through by all groups providing solidarity aid.

The final plenary dealt with how groups within Nicanet can work more closely together and what their priorities are for the national office in light of Kathy Hoyt’s retirement.

The Nicaragua Monitor received a lot of praise, but at the same time participants felt that it could be bimonthly or even quarterly if it is too much work for staff to keep it monthly. Some suggested that new technology could permit the elimination of a regular publication schedule and that articles could be posted to the web page continuously or delivered through an RSS feed.

Regarding the Nicanet web page, it was suggested that groups could link to it from their Facebook pages and vice versa and that Nicanet could help them sell fair trade products through its secure donations page. Some felt that a Nicaragua discussion listserv would be useful. Kaufman appealed for volunteer help for Nicanet’s web page and it was suggested that we run an ad in Idealist.org for someone who will do it to improve their resume. Two people volunteered some tech help. A recommendation was also made that Nicanet include some technical “how tos” on its web site for setting up a web page, blog, Facebook, etc.

The Nicaragua Hotline was universally felt to be the most useful information provided for local groups by the national office. One participant said, “After I open emails from my relatives, the hotline is the first thing I read.”

Many other ideas for working together were introduced in the discussion including support for groups trying to bring Nicaraguan speakers to the US who are often denied visas for economic reasons. Charlie Delaney-Megeso spoke about the situation of the Miskito people of the Caribbean Coast and their struggle for independence. The importance of promoting equal rights and peaceful dialogue was acknowledged by the group.

Some of the areas where we should work together were identified as closing the School of the Americas, immigration reform including prison funding and immigrant detention issues, the Trade Reform Act, mining, and foreigners buying up Nicaraguan property. Steve Edinger from Los Angeles advocated for Revolution Revival concerts to raise money for Nicaragua and El Salvador.

A West Coast regional meeting of Nicanet is being planned for this winter.