

Fortieth Anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution; Twenty-Ninth Anniversary of the Counter-Revolution in Power

July 19, 2019



I can only outline here the complex history of the Nicaraguan revolution and counter-revolution, but cannot do them justice in a short article. I have given a more detailed account in my article "Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua's Nov. 6 Election, and the Betrayal of a Revolution," New Politics, October 17, 2016. But I urge those who are interested in these developments to read the account in my book What Went Wrong? The Nicaraguan Revolution: A Marxist Analysis. I argue here once again that we must oppose U.S. imperialism, but support the Nicaraguan people in their struggle for democracy.

Forty years ago, we greeted the Nicaraguan Revolution with cheers. For the left around the world the late 1960s and early 1970s had been both tremendously thrilling and extremely disappointing at the same time. With the Sandinista overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, suddenly we on the left had a victory. And many of my generation rushed to Nicaragua to offer our help in one way or another while at the same time protesting U.S. President Ronald Reagan's backing of reactionary forces in Central America, including the *Contras*, in Nicaragua.

The Frustration of the Left of the 1960s and 70s

To appreciate just how important the Nicaraguan Revolution was for us all, let me remind of you of the situation we faced by the late 1970s. In France in May of 1968 the countrywide student protests and the general strike by 11 million workers was betrayed by the Communist Party and then in the election that followed, the authoritarian nationalist Charles de Gaulle was elected president.

That same year the Alexander Dubček became head of the ruling Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and began to put forward democratic reforms accompanied by rising social movements throughout the country. The possibility of democratic socialism seemed on the agenda,

but then Leonid Brezhnev, general secretary of the Communist Party and President of the Supreme Soviet, sent Russian tanks to invade Czechoslovakia and crush the movement.

And in Mexico in 1968, national movement for democracy, initiated by students but with massive public support, was crushed when President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz sent police and soldiers to repress a large demonstration at Tlaltelolco, the Plaza of Three Cultures, in Mexico City. Police killed hundreds, arrested over 1,300 and followed up with further repression of the pro-democracy movement.

The “Hot Autumn” of 1969-1970 in Italy, which saw over 400 strikes in the northern industrial region, but the Christian Democrats won the largest plurality in the 1972 election.

In Portugal, the Carnation Revolution of 1975, led by young military officers, overthrew fascist government of Marcello Caetano and brought liberation to Portugal’s African colonies, Angola and Mozambique, where African revolutionaries had been fighting for independence. The young officers, far left political parties, and workers’ organizations fought for socialism, but in 1976 the moderate social democrat, Mario Soares of the Socialist Party was elected president, saving capitalism.

In the United States the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement declined and then virtually disappeared by 1975 and the women’s movement lasted only a few years longer. The great U.S. strike wave of the late 1960s reached its apogee in 1970 then with the recession of 1974-75 went into a steep decline as the period called “deindustrialization” began, with the wide spread closing of steel mills, auto plants, and other industrial facilities. With the election of President Ronald Reagan politics and the culture generally shifted to the right. By the late 1970s it seemed that the post-war world, the capitalist West and the Communist East, were returning to Cold War normality. Pessimism began to engulf the left.

And then came Nicaragua. *¡Que Viva Nicaragua, Libre y Socialista!*

A Revolutionary Organization and a Popular Rebellion

The Nicaraguan Revolution was a tremendous victory over imperialism. Imperial powers—Spain, Great Britain, and the United States—had long dominated the small nation of Nicaragua. With its victory in the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States took control of the Caribbean and Central America, using its economic and military power to install governments that would do its bidding. Whenever that failed the United States would invade and occupation nations in that region, such as Haiti from 1915-1934 and Nicaragua from 1912-1933. Augusto César Sandino, a mystic, patriot, and radical, led a rag-tag army that heroically fought the U.S. Marines until they were withdrawn in 1933.

In the early 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, concerned about the developing world war in Europe and about America’s image, initiated the Good Neighbor Policy that ended U.S. military occupations in the Western Hemisphere. But the United States Marines left in its place pro-American governments and new military forces. In Nicaragua the Marines trained a new military force, the National Guard and chose Anastasio Somoza García to be its commander. Through a combination of elections and coups Somoza García made himself the heard of the government in 1936.

Elements of the Liberal and Conservative parties at times opposed Somoza, and in 1936 a patriot assassinated him, but he was succeeded by his two sons, Luis Somoza deBayle and Anastasio Somoza deBayle, establishing a dynastic dictatorship that lasted form 1936 to 1979. In the early 1960s a small revolutionary group that had come out of the pro-USSR Communist Party and was

influence by both Sandino and the Cuban Revolution created the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista Front for National Liberation or FSLN) with the goal of overthrowing Somoza.

For years the FSLN courageously pursued a combination of rural guerrilla warfare and spectacular urban kidnappings, though without success, with many young revolutionaries sick and starving in the mountains, dying in combat or captured and tortured. Then in the mid-1970s, Daniel Ortega, one of the Sandinista leaders, proposed a new strategy, a combination of alliances with Nicaraguan middle class forces, support from a wide variety of European and Latin American governments left, right, and center, and the creation of a real army that would coordinate with local groups in a national uprising. As the FSLN strategy gained ground, the fighting became fierce on the ground and the Nicaraguan air force bombed working class communities. Somoza deBayle was willing to bomb his own country into oblivion in order to stay in power. But on July 19, 1979 Somoza and his entourage fled and the Sandinistas took power.

Throughout Latin America and around the world, there were cheers for Nicaragua, even as we soon recognized that a tiny nation of three million people could only be successful in winning their freedom in the context of a broader revolutionary movement. We worked to support not only the Nicaraguan revolution, but also the revolutionary movement in Guatemala and El Salvador, hoping to see victories there too and the creation of a United Socialist States of Central America, which with broader Latin American and European backing might be able to survive the inevitable attacks from the United States.

The FSLN in Power

The Sandinistas had presumed that they would take power in coalition with more conservative political parties, but virtually all-political organization had collapsed. The FSLN created a *Junta de Gobierno*, a governing committee of five made up of two businesspeople, two known Sandinistas, and a fifth supposedly neutral member who was actually also a secret Sandinista. When the conservative businessmen resigned from the *Junta*, the Sandinista nine-man Sandinista directorate became the rulers of the country. The *Junta de Gobierno* created a kind of parliament in the form of a *Consejo de Estado*, though virtually all of its members were made up of Sandinista-led mass organizations.

In a party meeting, the Sandinistas pledge to create a Cuban-style government and to join the Communist camp, but publicly they called for political pluralism, a mixed economy, and non-alignment. In any case, the continued presence in Nicaragua of large landowners and businesspeople as well as the reviving Conservative and Liberal parties, and even small leftist opposition parties, made it impossible to create the one-party state the FSLN desired.

The Sandinistas began their government by mobilizing young to carry out spectacular literacy and health campaigns and drawing up plans for other social programs, but the *Contra* war that began in 1981, organized and financed by the United States made it impossible for the FSLN government to pursue its plans. At the same time, mistakes by the Sandinistas led some peasants who were denied titles to their land and some indigenous people who felt their autonomy was threatened, to join the *Contras*. Under pressure from the United States and European governments, the FSLN government held its first elections in 1985, with Daniel Ortega being elected president after the rightwing candidate withdrew at the suggestion of the U.S. government.

To continue to fight the violent attack, which was financed and supplied by the United States, Ortega's government initiated conscription. The draft too turned many Nicaraguans against the government. The U.S. *Contra* war finally work down the Nicaraguan people, led them to reject the FSLN government, and to vote for the U.S.-backed candidate Violeta Chamorro, a political novice,

for president at the head of coalition that stretched from the Communists to the Conservatives.

Counter-Revolution

Immediately upon her election to the presidency, Chamorro's coalition collapsed, but she still controlled the executive branch, which maintained connections to the United States, European governments, and international financial institutions. Daniel Ortega for his part led the Sandinista delegation in parliament and the mass organizations of workers, peasants, and women, while his brother Humberto Ortega headed the Nicaraguan Army. With both Ortega and Chamorro frustrated in their attempts to govern, Chamorro's son-in-law, Antonio Lacayo negotiated a deal with the Ortega brothers: behind the façade of the legal institutions, the three of them would run the country. So began the counter-revolution in Nicaragua.

In fact, the counter-revolution had begun just before Chamorro put on the presidential sash. The Sandinista leaders had distributed state property to various FSLN mass organizations, theoretically to protect it from confiscation by the right, but had also distributed a good deal of real estate to themselves in what came to be called the *piñata*. During the Chamorro presidency and then under presidents Arnaldo Alemán Daniel Ortega and the FSLN continued to make deals with the former political allies of Somoza, most shamefully protecting Alemán who was guilty of corruption as long as he would protect Ortega who was accused by his stepdaughter of sexual abuse. Ortega's power also survived the more right-wing but also less politically adroit presidency of *somocista* Enrique Bolaños.

During the years between 1990 and 2006, Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo completely transformed the Sandinista Front for National Liberation from the Cuban-inspired revolutionary group that it had been into a bourgeois political party whose principal function was electoral politics. Whatever revolutionary ideals had initially inspired Ortega and his comrades, during those years they sloughed them off. One after another former Sandinista *comandantes* began to resign from the party, some creating social democratic or socialist opposition groups. But Ortega's political machine, perfectly willing to use its goon squads against political opponents, maintained itself in power.

Elected by a plurality, Ortega became president for a second time in 2007, and was reelected in 2011 and 2016. To win these elections, Ortega and Murillo had established an alliance with the rightwing of the Catholic Church, themselves marrying in the church, and then after Ortega's election they pushed through the legislature one of the most draconian anti-abortion laws on the planet. Murillo launched a fierce attack on Nicaraguan feminist organizations, arguing that feminism was an imperialist project.

During his post-revolutionary years as president, Ortega formed ties to Nicaraguan capitalists, , for example, working with them to prevent independent union organization in the country's maquiladoras. With Nicaragua unable to provide jobs for all, the government facilitated Nicaraguan migration to work in Costa Rica. While regularly condemning U.S. imperialism, Ortega negotiated relationships with the U.S. military and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. At the same time, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela provided Ortega with petroleum and Alba, Chávez's development bank also provide millions in grants, personally controlled by Ortega.

Under Ortega and Murillo, Nicaragua's government came to function much like that of Mayor Richard J. Daley in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, or like that of Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) from the 1930s to the 2000s. The Ortega political machine used its control of jobs and the social welfare system to win elections, though hooliganism was employed when necessary. Ortega controlled not only the executive branch, but also the legislature, and the

Supreme Court, and his children owned and managed most of the country's TV and radio stations. Ortega still controlled most of the mass organizations created in the 1980s, though now hollowed out and largely controlled by promises of government handouts.

Protest and Popular Uprising

In 2013 Ortega announced that his government would construct a 50 billion dollar canal financed by Wang Jing, a magnate with ties to the Chinese government, Nicaraguan environmentalists and farmers who would be affected by the canal began to protest. Police and FSLN loyalists attacked the protesters, foreshadowing the response to the popular rebellion five years later. When in April of 2018 the government announced reforms in the social security system that would adversely affect retirees, some pensioners began to protest. Then students and others joined the protests which spread from Managua to half a dozen other cities.. Faced with the challenge the Ortega government deployed the police and within days 26 people were killed.

Negotiations that had begun in May sponsored by the Church between the government and the opposition broke down because of Ortega's intransigence. Over the next few months Nicaragua witnessed a popular rebellion as students occupied the universities and people throughout the country blocked highways and fortified their towns. Ortega deployed not only the police but also FSLN shock troops who together over the next six months killed approximately 300, wounded thousands, and arrested hundreds, and eventually suppressed the rebellion. The government shut down opposition TV and other media and closed non-governmental organizations.

Today Ortega, the former revolutionary transformed into a counter-revolutionary, remains in power. The largest and most significant independent organizations in the country are on the right: COSEP, the Superior Council of Private Industry and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Both got along quite well with both the Somoza and Ortega dictatorships. They will not be forces for the liberation of the Nicaraguan people. The closing of critical media outlets and NGOs has weakened the popular movement, though networks of opposition activists still exist and come together in the Articulación de Movimientos Sociales y Organizaciones de Sociedad Civil (Nicaraguan Platform of Social Movements and Civil Society Organizations). Ortega and the FSLN have largely discredited the idea of socialism, and within Nicaragua, there is no organized left political party of any significance, though some of the students have an interest in the left.

The United States government can play no progressive role in Nicaragua and we in the United States should oppose economic U.S. sanctions, political pressure, and above all any military intervention. At the same time, the Nicaraguan people, their movement suppressed for the moment, continue to yearn for an end to the Ortega dictatorship and we should stand on their side.