

Solidarity with Nicaragua: The Long View from Canada

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Canadian Solidarity with Nicaragua in the 21st century.

Thank you to the conference organizers. It has been a fascinating couple of days... I’m approaching this session topic from the perspective of one kind of Canadian solidarity with one country, Nicaragua.

But first, by way of self-introduction: Academically my home is in the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology at the University of Saskatchewan, in Canada. I am not an historian or expert in Latin American studies, but I’ve worked in solidarity with Nicaragua for almost 40 years both in and outside of the country.

This presentation is based on political organizing experience, a visit to Nicaragua in May, a recent review of 15 meters of archival data on the 1980s Nicaraguan solidarity movement, and on discussions with union leaders, other solidarity activists, Nicaraguan comrades, and folks in the Nicaraguan diaspora.

In these ten minutes I’ll try to give you a snapshot of Canadian solidarity with Nicaragua from efforts in the 1980s to those of today. I’ll then name some current political challenges for the Canadian Left in doing this kind of solidarity work, and if time allows will offer a couple of thoughts on how we might move forward.

First, a snapshot of Canadian solidarity with Nicaragua in the 1980s and 90s:

The Sandinista revolution – with its mysticism, hope and anti-Reagan sentiment – was an easy sell for the Canadian Left and people joined the Nicaragua solidarity movement by the thousands. One aspect of it, Tools for Peace, was in fact the biggest mobilization of Canadian international solidarity in the 20th century. The movement included workers, professionals, students and farmers; it was multi-sectoral and politically pluralist. The Stalinist Left, the non-Stalinist Left, social democrats and liberals all supported the FSLN political program – even while holding divergent opinions on certain aspects, such as the party’s stance vis-à-vis independent labour unions. In the 1980s it was easy to

name the common enemy – US military intervention – and to agree on strategies, which were mainly: material aid to break the blockade, political education and mobilization, and lobbying for an independent position for Canadian foreign policy vis-à-vis the US.

But when the FSLN lost the 1990 election, it took only a few years until the entire movement disbanded. A few individuals and organizations hung on, turning their support to the new NGOs that were absorbing the Sandinista cadres expelled from government jobs. But the vast networks of solidarity died – leaving a lot of people with a case of permanent nostalgia. We who identified with Canadian Left or social democratic positions and who have continued to work in solidarity with Nicaragua ever since became a very, very small group.

In the 1990s the challenges of working in solidarity grew as the context changed and the contradictions deepened. We watched the rise of neoliberalism in the country with disdain and we supported struggles to defy it; but we also saw the piñata, the pacts, the FSLN's anti-democratic tendency and a growing discontent with its centralized power structure. We cringed at the neoliberal extractivist and clientelist model that Ortega concocted in his 16 years in opposition and then enacted once back in government in 2007. We fumed at the ongoing attacks on feminists and feminism, and we watched as the governing party decimated the opposition, concentrated the media, and consolidated its control over all major institutions. However, we also saw the Sandinistas become a less than homogeneous group. And most of that small group of still engaged Canadians from critical Left and feminist positions supported Sandinistas critical of Ortega who, together with others from oppositional groups, were working in the feminist, anti-mining, health, maquiladora and anti-canal movements now targeted by the government.

Importantly, while there were political party manipulations – of all stripes – within those movements, they were clearly expressions of democratic organizing and mobilization, whether they were communities that rose up against Canadian mining companies, women who organized International women's day celebrations, or others who supported maquila workers organizing in the absence of non-party-affiliated labour unions. And the government repression of their dissent was well known, though largely ignored by the international mainstream, and only sporadically covered by the Left alternative press before April of this year.

What matters here is that critical Sandinistas, feminists, anti-mining environmental activists and many in their very reduced international critical Left support base had indeed been supporting myriad oppositional movements and organizations – BECAUSE they were the most progressive forces in the country. Most had been doing so despite Ortega's growing control over their dissent – long before the April uprising. These facts have been massively manipulated ever since.

So, then the April uprising happens.

The simmering discontent clashes head-on with the forces of repression — and a new phase of international solidarity in Canada is born.

But it's a birth full of complications.

First, you have the few small groups of primarily Nicaraguan diaspora that have emerged in Canada as elsewhere under the hashtag #SOSNicaragua. In these groups, you have the odd combination of Left, social democrats, liberals – and anti-communists – all protesting the repression and the human rights abuses together. They've united for humanitarian reasons, and out of shared anger at Ortega and his wife, who is also his Vice-President. They want to end the violence and seek a return to an imagined era of democratic rule of law. But at least in Canada, these SOS groups neither have their own, nor seek to support any particular political platform. In fact, their discourse is bereft of

political analysis; several leaders told me that Left and right were meaningless categories to them. Debates do occur as to their strategies – and this indicates perhaps incipient political positions – but for now, the simplistic messages of these groups leaves the pseudo-anti-imperialist Left and a nostalgic 1980s Left room to denounce their solidarity with Nicaraguan students as being part of an imperialist plot.

Loud voices like Max Blumenthal, Camilo Mejía and Kevin Zeese find echo among 1980s nostalgics, and get traction in *Counterpunch*, *Truthdig* and *Gray Zone*. Mejía for example finds no fault in the recent rescinding of the right to assembly – in fact, he posted a comment last week to the effect of “*Well in Miami you need permits – what’s the problem...*” And Blumenthal’s support for Ortega in Nicaragua is as uncritical and vehement as his support for Assad in Syria.

Rohini Hensman, author of *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-revolution and the Rhetoric of Anti-imperialism* suggests that there are three overlapping categories of such pseudo-anti-imperialists: 1) those who are unable to deal with complexity, who see Western imperialism as the only oppressor in ALL situations; who seek and use information that proves only their thesis; and who are oblivious to the fact that people in other parts of the world have agency; 2) those who are neo-Stalinists following a narrow sectarian dogma; and 3) those who are tyrants with well-funded state media who “claim that they are being criticized *because* they are anti-imperialists.”

The dangerous position of those pseudo-anti-imperialists obscures the dense and layered reality within Nicaragua, allows the state-sponsored human rights abuses to continue, and makes the work of those of us in Canada who are trying to rally solidarity and support for the Left in Nicaragua very difficult. They are solidarity’s nemesis and bear some responsibility both for what is unfolding and for the slow solidarity response from the organized Left in Canada.

We see this clearly in the response of the Canadian unions. Incredibly, to my knowledge, there have been virtually NO public statements issued about the uprising from Canadian unions. On a phone call last week with the international solidarity office of CUPE – our largest public sector union – I was told the union was “being cautious”, that it “hasn’t been that clear” that “we are grappling with it.” But again, their paralysis is largely explainable by an examination of the Facebook pages of those members of the union that they rely on for advice – whose support for Ortega is unwavering. There we see the 1980s nostalgia and Blumenthal’s version of the world converge. And we hear a deafening silence for the maquila workers that the unions theoretically support through the Maria Elena Cuadra movement – whose leader is in hiding.

Overall, I would say, sadly, this new Canadian solidarity movement, if we can even call it that, is not currently very effective in supporting the future of Nicaragua’s Left. How could it be? The national and global opposition to Ortega is a mind-fuck of diverse actors, with incredibly opposing political perspectives – a fact the pseudo-left is exploiting. And while there are signs it is reemerging, it is difficult to even locate a coherent democratic Left organization in Nicaragua to support. But Ortega’s state-sponsored abuses, illegal detentions, extrajudicial killings, and quashing of the right to assembly need to be denounced – and our solidarity cannot vacillate as we await the perfect new revolutionary forces to gel.

So what is to be done?

Some direction on how to support Nicaraguan progressives and an alternative critical Left in formation is offered by two voices to whom I now turn.

A Marxist friend of mine related to me how after the defeat of the Paris Commune, Marx declared that two tasks were at hand: critical journalism and support for political refugees. Critical

journalism on Nicaragua today must include rigorous debunking of the myths propagated by the dangerously anti-democratic pseudo-anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Blumenthals of the world.

Rohini Hensman adds that the task of complicating the narrative and supporting Left democratic movements must include calling out the neo-Stalinist, neo-orientalist, simplistic recipes that are relied on by these indefensible ideologues. And for her, that task necessarily means pursuing the truth and telling it, bringing morality back into Left politics, and fighting for democracy. Eyes wide open.