

Nicaragua - yes! humbug - no!

WHEN THE rebel army — whose central core was 'communist' and Castroite in origin — took power in Nicaragua in mid-1979, it had the backing of an immense mass mobilisation. It was also backed by large sections, and probably by a majority, of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie had been excluded not only from direct political power but also from the more lucrative economic activities by the Somoza family, which ran Nicaragua as a private estate. The Nicaraguan bourgeoisie, for example, helped organise a general strike in the run-up to Somoza's downfall.

Thus the Nicaraguan revolution was made by a very broad spectrum of classes.

Terceristas

Those now in power in Managua originated as part of the great political wave of Castroism and Guevarism which swept through Latin America in the '60s and early '70s under the impetus and inspiration of the Cuban revolution. In Nicaragua the Guevarists suffered heavy defeats. After their defeats, they fragmented. Then in the mid-'70s the Sandinistas reunited under the domination of the right-wing faction, the Terceristas, who argued for a moderate 'social democratic' programme and an anti-Somoza alliance with the bourgeoisie as a means of winning state power.

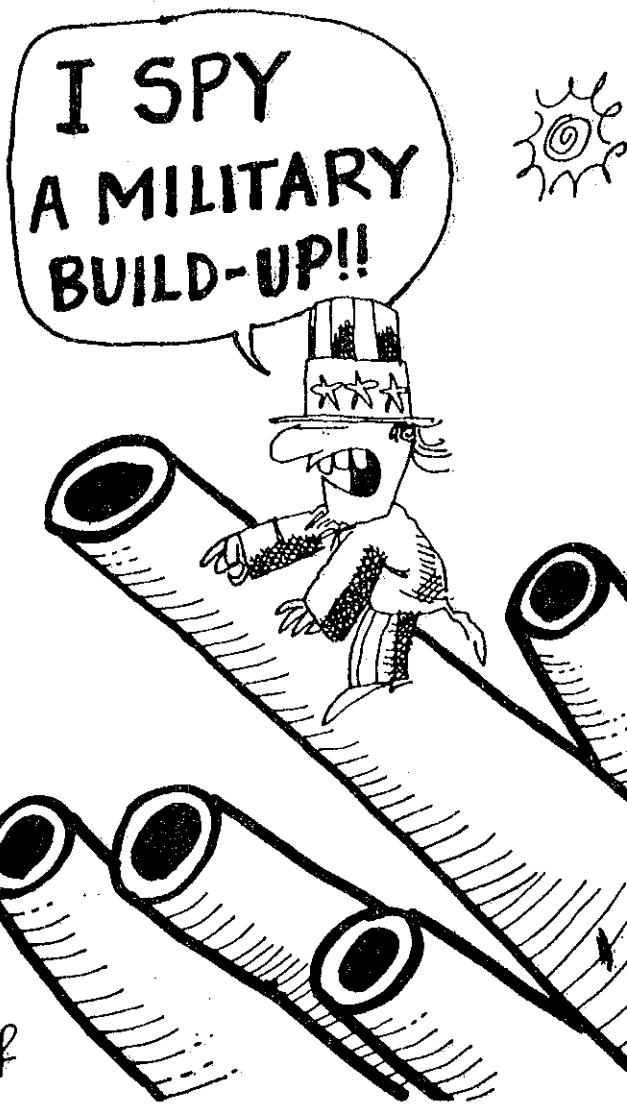
Eventually most of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie backed the Tercerista-led Sandinistas. Though unhappy at the overthrow of Somoza, even the US was relatively favourable to the new regime at first. President Jimmy Carter stood between the Sandinistas and anti-communist backwoodsmen in his own Congress. For the first 18 months the Sandinista regime was heavily dependent on US aid.

Who rules in Nicaragua now? Which class has state power? The Sandinista revolution wiped out the old Somozist state apparatus and created a new state machine — dominated by the Sandinistas, staffed by them. The bourgeoisie got less direct state power than they had had under Somoza, and by 1980 they began to make a big international fuss about it. But the

Sandinistas did not radically transform the economy, which remained in the hands of the bourgeoisie. The Sandinistas carried through a land reform, nationalised banks and mining — but two-thirds of industry and most of land is still in private hands.

So what is the class character of Nicaragua today? Capitalist: the state defends

private property. And its relation to the working class? The Sandinistas are nationalists — they do not see the working class as the centre of revolutionary politics. They have repressed the working class, promoting a state trade union, curbing the right to strike, and used 'states of emergency' against the working class. For most of



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A Nicaraguan envoy shakes hands with Liverpool city councillor John Hamilton

their rule striking — 'economic sabotage' — has carried a three-year jail sentence.

But the Nicaraguan state is not *simply* capitalist. The bourgeoisie is, and has been since mid-'79, at the mercy of the Sandinistas, a stable Stalinist-type formation holding direct state power. Within a few months of the revolution there were rifts in the popular front constructed by the Sandinistas, and the rifts would soon show themselves to be irreparable. The bourgeoisie could see plainly that whatever the Sandinistas said, they were not stabilised on the basis of a commitment to private property. The Sandinistas saw a long-term role for private property in the backward economy disrupted by civil war — but private property within a state committed to 'socialism'. Cuba was their ultimate model. The bourgeoisie were even alarmed at the literacy drive, which was accompanied by Sandinista political propaganda. Not without some justification, they began to see everything the Sandinistas did, from the literacy drive to setting up neighbourhood committees to creating their own trade union, as parts of a concerted plan designed to create an authoritarian party-state in Nicaragua on the Cuban model.

Immediately after July 1979 there was a five-person junta with two non-Sandinistas. But early in 1980 there were disputes about the composition of the promised Council of State. The bourgeoisie were alarmed.

They were also alarmed by the Sandinistas' pro-USSR policy on international questions. (For example, the Sandinistas supported the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, and a year later they supported the suppression of Solidarnosc in Poland). By early 1980 a clear bourgeois opposition had emerged.

From early 1981, after Reagan took power and gave the green light to the Congress backwoodsmen, Nicaragua's relations with the US became very hostile.

Former Somozists and others built up counter-revolutionary armed forces on the border. In Costa Rica, a former Sandinista, Eden Pastora, built up a different anti-Somozist force. The CIA became heavily involved.

The CIA exploited the conflict between the Sandinista government and the Miskito Indians — about 5% of the population, living on the west coast, speaking English, and little integrated into Nicaragua — a sort of national minority. The Sandinista regime was initially heavy-handed and oppressive towards the Miskitos, disrupting their local

self-government. Expressive of the true nationalist character of the Sandinistas was the fact that their literacy drive tried to make the Miskitos literate — in Spanish. Bitter conflict developed, though the Sandinista regime has now agreed to Miskito autonomy and made peace with some Miskito leaders.

The Sandinista regime has also developed a welfare state — education, health, etc. — and subsidised food prices. Ordinary people in Nicaragua are now better off than in the past. The regime certainly has a lot of popular support, despite the crippling of the economy by debt problems, US-inspired sabotage, etc.

That's important. But for Marxists it's not the end of the story.

Where does the Sandinista revolution stand now, six years after Somoza fled? The Nicaraguan revolution is in limbo. The contras have had only sporadic military success. The USSR does not seem willing to sponsor Nicaragua completely, though US pressure is driving Nicaragua closer and closer to the USSR. Nicaragua is at present capitalist but has the possibility of peaceful evolution to a Stalinist state where capitalism has been overthrown. The Sandinista social measures are progressive but not socialist. The Sandinista state in Nicaragua is not totalitarian. Even state organisations show some autonomous life

And there are some strikes.

Guatemala

There is some pluralism, but there is also a strong pressure towards a Stalinist regime. The prospects are fairly bleak. The US seems to be almost deliberately driving Nicaragua along the Cuban road, though some elements in the US ruling class dissent. But Nicaragua is not an island like Cuba. It is far more vulnerable. If the US keeps up the pressure, Nicaragua is more likely to be a Guatemala — where a left-liberal government was overthrown in 1954 by a US-backed invasion — than a Cuba. Nor can Nicaragua simply shift into the economic and military protection of the Stalinist camp.

What the Sandinistas have done socio-economically is not exceptional by the standards of many Third World countries. It's *who they are* that alarms the bourgeoisie and the US. The Sandinistas are serious and determined revolutionaries, a conscious political formation. But they're a

Stalinist-type formation, and they have secure state power and a relatively very powerful military/political apparatus which gives the ruling faction the possibility of going down the Cuban road all the way, with little need to bother about internal opposition.

Up to now, the Sandinista welfare state, including food subsidies, has offset the low wages and softened the effects of the workers of the effective outlawing of strikes. But things are changing. Immense damage has been done and is being done to the Nicaraguan economy by both the counter-revolutionary guerrillas and the implacably hostile economic pressure of the US. Food subsidies have been cut and therefore the prospects are that there will be great pressure from the workers for compensating wage rises. How will the regime respond? The prospects are of severe repression of the working class by the Sandinista regime.

Solidarity

On a cold assessment it makes sense not to go for wholesale expropriation of capitalists, especially small capitalists, in an underdeveloped country like Nicaragua. Such economic cauterisation by a state which cannot, in a very poor economy, fill the function it suppresses, is no part of the socialist programme. Engels scoffed at the notion, and Trotsky rightly criticised Stalin for it in the far more favourable conditions of Russia after 1928. But if the Sandinista government cossets capitalists and bans strikes, socialists have to take a basic class line — 'everything for the workers'. Some of the Sandinista military spending is also questionable: it is necessary to distinguish between defence spending and spending on preparations for internal repression.

The crimes of US imperialism against the government and people of Nicaragua brand the US for what it is — a brutal imperialist power, which would if it can't overthrow the Sandinista government drive it into the blind alley of Cuba-style Stalinism in order to 'save it from communism'. It goes without saying that socialists must give their political aid and solidarity, and what practical help we can, to Nicaragua in its resistance to US pressure, sabotage and possibly invasion.

What the workers of Nicaragua do not need from socialists in Britain and other western countries is that we glorify what exists there as the very latest model of socialism. It is very far from that, and if it goes the full way towards the Cuban model of 'socialism', as a clone of Havana or a direct client of Moscow, it will be far from it still.

We need to argue for the political and trade union independence of the Nicaraguan working class from the state and to attack and criticise any infringements on those rights by the Sandinista government. We need to explain in the British labour movement that though the Sandinistas are better than Somoza and better by far than anything that the US will impose, neither their regime now nor any Cuba-style development of it is socialism. Nicaragua cannot grow into socialism without the Nicaraguan working class seizing power. The consolidation of a Cuba-style regime in Nicaragua — even if it is adorned by a marginally-free parliamentary election in a society heavily under the control of a Stalinist state — will not be a victory for the Nicaraguan and international working class but a defeat.

Defend and develop the Nicaraguan revolution — against US imperialism and against Stalinism!