Improving the lives of the majority: Nicaragua’s example

Trade unions flourish

Women in manual trades: overcoming barriers

Confronting chronic kidney disease epidemic

Nicaragua’s target:
94% renewable energy by 2017

UK-Nicaragua solidarity
A spate of strong earthquakes in mid April, one of them 6.6 on the Richter scale, was a painful reminder of the fact that Managua is situated on the intersection of five major earthquake fault lines. For older Managuans the quakes brought back painful memories of the 1972 earthquake that claimed 10,000 lives, destroyed 50,000 houses and displaced half the city’s population. It was also a reminder of the dangers facing the country as a whole: in the path of hurricanes, subject to volcanic eruptions and, according to the UN Development Programme, one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. On the other hand, volcanoes together with plenty of wind, sun, and water sources are favourable factors which should enable Nicaragua to reach its target of 94% renewable energy by 2017. See page 6.

Nicaragua’s other vulnerability is its location in the so-called ‘backyard’ of the US which has resulted in an infrastructure and economy geared towards the political and economic interests of its northern neighbour. Despite substantial improvements in living standards since the return to power of the Sandinista government in 2007, the country remains the poorest in the Americas after Haiti. In this issue of Nicaragua Now we talk to Carlos Fonseca of the FSLN international department about the achievements of the Sandinista government in improving the well-being of the majority and strategies for sustaining this into the future. The government has focused on diversification of trading relations, promoting foreign direct investment, and reducing dependence on aid. Relations with Venezuela through ALBA have been critical to the implementation of many of the government’s very effective poverty reduction programmes.

The violent destabilisation of Venezuela by extremist opposition groups calling for the overthrow of the government are yet another illustration of the determination of the US to restore its waning authority across the Americas. This kind of destabilisation constitutes an attack not just on Venezuela but on the integration project of the whole region. However, the fact that both Union of South American States (UNASUR) and the Organisation of American States (OAS) condemned the violence and called for the “protection of democratic institutions and the rule of law” demonstrates how far Latin America has moved away from vulnerability to the divide and rule politics of the US.
Central America confronts chronic kidney health epidemic

Chronic Kidney Disease of unknown causes (CKDu) results in progressive, decreased kidney function. Whereas CKD is associated with diabetes, obesity and hypertension in older patients, those who develop CKDu tend to be much younger and generally do not have these conditions. The origins and exact cause of CKDu is unknown but it is thought to be linked with a combination of dehydration and agrochemicals particularly affecting sugarcane workers. CKDu often affects young men, destroying their kidneys. The only means of survival - dialysis or a kidney transplant - is way beyond the means of poor agricultural workers and their families. Numerous studies have so far failed to identify the exact cause or causes of the epidemic. Meanwhile, families, communities and health officials struggle to cope with its devastating consequences. However, researchers, community advocates, the sugar industry, and governments are finally investing substantial resources into more sophisticated studies raising hopes that the cause will be established so that preventative measures can be put in place.

La Isla Foundation (LIF)
LIF is a public health and policy NGO addressing the CKDu epidemic among sugarcane workers in Latin America. LIF takes its name from an area in Chichigalpa known as the ‘Island of Widows’ where 46% of the male deaths in the past ten years have been caused by CKDu. The Foundation supports workers and communities through micro credit programmes, alternative job training, sanitation and access to water projects, and workshops on employment and community rights. Their research and advocacy focuses on public health and human rights. This includes facilitating and carrying out research to aid in the prevention of CKDu, improving access to care for those already sick, researching workplace compliance practices, and providing direct legal services. Another key area of work is raising awareness within Nicaragua and internationally of a largely ignored epidemic.

Further information: www.laislafoundation.org
www.sciencemag.org/content/344/6180.143.full

Daniel Valdivia
Daniel Valdivia is president of ASNAAPIRC (Nicaraguan Association of the CKD-Affected and their Allies) in Chichigalpa where the majority of men are employed as sugarcane workers by Nicaragua Sugar Estates Limited (NSEL).

“We formed our organisation in 2012 with a group of 10 people, right now we have between 750 to 1,000 members. Our main objective is that the former sugar cane workers and dependants of those that have already died receive indemnity, and that those CKD sufferers unable to work receive some kind of severance pay. The mortality rate that exists here in Chichigalpa is so horrendous that nobody wants to believe it: two or three people are dying every day. This is why we decided to fight for an indemnity so that the more than 20,000 orphaned children and more than 7,000 widows will have some support. Since 2012 about 250 ASNAAPIRC members have died. We’ve got situations where 10 or 12 people from the same family have died. There are rural communities like Guanacatal that have almost been wiped out, they call it the ‘island of widows.’ Another is Candelaria where the whole community is employed by the NSEL and up to three people a day are dying. Fit, healthy people go to work in the cane fields, then after two or three years they have to quit as they are sick with CKD. They are then unable to work, become unemployed and die without any help or benefits. This is the cause ASNAAPIRC is fighting, waiting for an indemnity … not compensation as it is something we have the right to as workers.”
Carlos Fonseca Terán from the International Department of the FSLN was a keynote speaker at December’s Latin America conference and spoke at events in Cardiff, Bristol, Leeds and Sheffield. Carlos is the son of Carlos Fonseca Amador, one of the FSLN’s founders who was killed in combat in 1976. Liz Light, NSC representative in Nicaragua, interviewed him in Managua.

What was your key message to UK audiences about the FSLN government’s programmes? To explain the revolutionary transformation of Nicaraguan society, how this manifests itself in economic and social policies and programmes and the political model we are promoting. Fundamental to this is achieving improvements in living conditions for the majority of the population. It is incredibly important the international community and progressive forces understand what we are doing, since there are detractors who attack the FSLN, seeking to undermine our credibility.

What do you consider the key achievements of the Sandinistas since returning to government in 2007? One key achievement has been setting up neighbourhood Councils for Citizens’ Power – an expression of direct democracy based on the belief that citizens not only elect government representatives but also decide on policies and what their representatives should be doing.

The impact of social programmes in reducing poverty means we hold second place in Latin America for the greatest reduction of inequality after Venezuela. One of the first things the Sandinistas did after coming to power was to join ALBA* – a crucial step in realising our revolutionary project. Through a bilateral agreement Nicaragua buys oil from Venezuela and pays half the cost within 90 days, either in cash or in food exports, such as beans and beef. The other half is converted into a 20-year loan at 2% interest. Nicaragua invests these funds into social programmes such as Zero Hunger which has provided support for 100,000 rural women and their families; Zero Usury, supporting 130,000 women with low-interest loans and training to set up micro-businesses; and credit and training in the production of basic grains for small farmers, as part of a plan to improve food security. We have renationalised education and health which are now free; illiteracy has been cut from 36% to 3%; and over 100,000 people have benefited from an affordable housing and home repair programme.

During the last period of the neo-liberal government an energy crisis meant hours of blackouts on a daily basis. It would have been impossible for the Sandinista government to resolve the crisis if we hadn’t joined ALBA.

We are also very proud of the fact that Nicaragua is relatively safe compared to other Central American countries, even after demobilising 185,000 soldiers after the war. The Sandinista Revolution helped change the consciousness of society.

The World Economic Forum gender equality index recently ranked Nicaragua 10th in the world. The UK was 18th and the US 23rd. What was the government’s role in this achievement? For many years the FSLN was the only party with a quota for women’s participation in internal party positions and as candidates for public office – initially 25%, now 50%. This has meant a continuing increase in women holding public posts. These quotas have now been written into the constitution. A fundamental part of the revolutionary struggle is the fight against gender oppression, including economic and political oppression. The government’s main social programmes have a strong gender vision. Where these programmes are exclusively aimed at women, it is women who control the resources, to encourage greater independence and autonomy.

How has the alliance between the government, workers and private enterprise contributed to realising the revolutionary project? In the interests of economic stability and the promotion of our revolutionary project we need private enterprise. There are almost 70 laws that have come out of this consensus – such as the minimum wage – which have contributed a lot to the country’s economic stability. It is an alliance in which we defend the

* ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America, is made up of Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. It is an alliance based on social, political and economic integration that promotes human and economic development through solidarity, mutual trust and respect.
interests of the workers while avoiding confrontations. In the 1980s this didn't happen because private enterprise identified the FSLN as its enemy. However, very pragmatically, they now understand they either have to leave Nicaragua or learn to coexist with us.

Why does the government still depend so heavily on aid – especially from the European Union – and loans from the IMF? Approximately 30% of our national budget comes from foreign cooperation so it is vital for our economy. We aspire to free ourselves from the IMF, but while our productive capacity remains fragile we depend on foreign cooperation. Many countries providing aid belong to the EU and a condition of that cooperation is IMF approval of Nicaragua's national budget. In the medium term things are going to change: with the Interoceanic canal project Nicaragua will have the resources to do without such IMF and foreign aid.

What are the key government programmes for the coming years? Nicaragua's National Assembly approved a bill to grant a 50-year concession to the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Investment Co (HKND) to conduct a feasibility study and build a 250km canal across Nicaragua at a cost of US$40billion.

The benefits for the country will far outweigh the costs. There are two key issues related to the canal – the environment and national sovereignty. The primary interest of those involved is to protect the water resources, which will never happen without the canal. The canal will also guarantee the foundation of our national sovereignty, economic independence. Construction is due to start in 2015 and will last approximately five years.

Since 2006 the Nicaraguan economy grew on average by 4-5% annually. This economic growth has been the reason behind achieving much more social equality than other countries in the region. With the canal we estimate economic growth will reach 15% annually, providing resources that would be impossible to obtain any other way and which will have a huge impact in reducing unemployment.

All our social programmes to reduce poverty and inequality will continue. We will strengthen the process of direct democracy through citizen participation. One of the main tasks will be to raise people's awareness of the fact that to have a better life you need to participate in decision-making about how state resources are used in your community.

What is the significance of ALBA and Petrocaribe to Latin American integration? Culturally and historically, Latin America is one nation and we should express ourselves as a single country or state just as Bolivar, Marti, Sandino and Morazan believed. ALBA and Petrocaribe are part of this continental socialist transformation.

Why is international solidarity important to you? International solidarity is not only an economic issue, it's also about moral and political solidarity, that revolutionary support from around the world from people who identify with our ideals. But we have a very welcome problem – in the 1980s Cuba and Nicaragua were the only revolutionary ‘novelties’ so everybody came to support us. But now there is Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and, of course, Cuba, without which none of what we are doing would have been possible. This has contributed to Nicaragua being ignored. It's a welcome problem as we are now not alone in Latin America, however we need to remind people that the Sandinista Revolution still exists.

Further information: Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign
www.nicaraguasc.org.uk
Nicaragua Solidarity
Twitter NSCAG_UK
Solar power: improving the quality of life in rural Nicaragua

Danielle Gent, a postdoctoral research associate at Loughborough University, explains how a micro credit programme, supported by the Leicester Masaya Link Group, is enabling people in rural areas to improve their quality of life by using electricity produced from their own solar home systems.

Esmeralda lives with her family in the small community of Cuadrante 80, which is located about 30 kilometres from Managua. Until recently, she was one of 1.4 billion people globally without access to electricity.

That was until Esmeralda participated in a project that enabled her to purchase a solar home system (SHS). This means that Esmeralda and her family have electric lighting and no longer suffer the polluting kerosene lamp, or strain their eyes using candles. It also means that she can easily spot dangerous spiders and snakes, help her children with homework and socialise with other family and community members – all this during the hours of darkness. Previously she would have gone to bed at nightfall.

The SHS also powers a limited number of small devices; for instance, Esmeralda no longer has to travel to the nearest grid-connected town to recharge her mobile phone.

SHSs and other solar lighting technologies provide modest amounts of electricity to several million people like Esmeralda across the developing world; small scale solar energy systems have emerged as the key technology in international efforts to address energy poverty, including Nicaragua. The SHS has become the technology of choice for the electrification of remote off-the-grid regions, stimulated by the World Bank’s Renewable Energy for Rural Zones Initiative. This initiative has encouraged an environment that enables those households traditionally left out of the expansion of the electricity grid to access good quality SHS products.

In 2005, the Association for Integrated Community Development (ADIC), with support from the Leicester-Masaya Link Group in the UK, established a project that offers interest-free micro-credit to families wishing to purchase a SHS. Over 200 households in rural areas of Masaya and Managua have participated in the project, repaying the credit over extended periods, and typically spending less than they would on poorer quality lighting sources, such as candles or kerosene.

‘Rural electrification without exclusion’ is the goal of the Nicaraguan government – and recent evidence points to a veritable ‘energy revolution’ underway in a country which previously had one of the lowest levels of energy development in Latin America. The Ministry of Energy and Mines believes that the current huge expansion of the national grid expansion needs to be complemented by technologies such as SHS to provide small amounts of electricity in areas that would otherwise be unserved.

Nicaragua aims for 94% renewable energy by 2017

According to experts Nicaragua is a renewable energy paradise. The country has extensive geothermic resources resulting from its large volcanic chain and seismic activity, and plenty of wind, sun and water. These favourable factors combined with political will have meant that Nicaragua has one of the most ambitious renewable energy goals in the world — it intends to have 94% of its electricity come from renewable energy by 2017.

Projects under construction include the Tumarin hydro electric project due for completion in 2016 which could provide up to 50% of the country’s electricity, two further wind farms and the San Jacinto-Tizate geothermal plant.

According to CleanTechnica, if Nicaragua achieves 94% renewable electricity by 2017, it will become an inarguable example of success, not just environmentally, but also economically — because a significant portion of its GDP will no longer be spent on foreign oil.

Further information: www.leicestermasayalink.org.uk
The Association of Women Builders of Condega (AMCC) provides technical training for women and young people together with courses on sexual and reproductive rights, communication and citizenship. These technical courses integrate theory and practice and open up new opportunities. The gender classes help students to develop critical thinking and to deal with negative attitudes of people not used to seeing women working as carpenters or welders.

Diana Leticia Merlos Bellorín (25) is a welder, carpenter, coordinator of the youth group 'Naci para Volar', and AMCC’s vice-president. Diana came to AMCC in 2008 to attend a welding course. She recalls the comments that people would make: "Whenever I was asked, 'Where are you from?' 'What are you studying?' I would answer 'I am in Condega on a welding course'. People would laugh and say, 'You can’t do that, you’ll get burnt, it will make you sterile, blind, etc. ' - lots of prejudices. Early on, we thought we had all the arguments to defend ourselves but the gender classes have given us more ideas. Sometimes we would say that we could get burnt just as easily working in the kitchen! Also, as health and safety is critical on the job, we are required to be well protected. If one follows the procedures, nothing will happen. Another thing is manual work. If men work with their hands, we can too, we also have hands!"

Felipa Nery Ruiz Gonzalez (58), a builder and AMCC president, talks about how the training has improved her self-confidence and self-esteem. "I am not ashamed to say 'I am a builder and I can do anything'. And if people say 'If you are a carpenter, come and hang this door, put this lock on', I will say 'yes, with pleasure'. Sometimes, as women, we feel worthless. But that is wrong. Since I came here, I have developed my ideas a lot. I am a leader, I know where to go to talk about the training. I have managed to get people to come here and that makes me feel very powerful."

Interviews from “Atrevete de soñar” by Irene Villafranca: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQjCFlTi2oVQ

Edited and translated by Helen Shears, AMCC Technical Coordinator

Further information:
AMCC - Condega
AMCCcondega
www.amcc-condega.blogspot.com
www.mujeresconstructoras.org

### AMCC

**1987** AMCC set up when a group of women on a brigade from the US built the Moises Cordoba primary school. AMCC’s provides women with a place to learn technical skills and trades and to overcome prejudices regarding gender roles.

**1995** Carpentry workshop inaugurated in self-built premises and the group starts classes on marketing products.

**1999–2001** After Hurricane Mitch, 32 homes built for female heads of households.

**2005** Women’s technical training school founded, offering basic courses and specialist courses for retraining.

**2010** New larger premises built, using improved adobe and natural building materials and techniques. AMCC offers graduates and students the chance to do practical work on site.
Regional integration further isolates US and Canada
Thirty-three heads of state and government met in Havana on 28 – 29 January for the second summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) which is made up of all the states of the western hemisphere with the exception of the US and Canada. For the first time they were joined by UN and Organisation of American States (OAS) general secretaries Ban Ki-moon and Jose Miguel Insulza. According to Luis Suarez, a Cuban Latin American specialist, "it is the first time in 200 years that the countries of Our America have founded an organisation at this level without it being convened by the US or Europe.' He added: ‘the presence of heads of state of all countries in the region demonstrates the failure of the US in isolating us.' The Summit solidified agreements in the socio-economic, security, and energy areas and declared Latin America a zone of peace. President Daniel Ortega commented that the spirit of solidarity and complementarity is still lacking and that this is necessary to enable the poorest countries to join the more developed countries as full economic subjects.

President Hugo Chavez remembered
On 5 March, the first anniversary of the death of Hugo Chavez, President Daniel Ortega placed a wreath on a monument in Havana and flew to Caracas to participate in a memorial event. Ortega recalled Chavez as ‘a clear expression of the spirit of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, of their desire for liberty, for justice, and for sovereignty.' Among the leaders who also joined President Nicolas Maduro were Presidents Raul Castro of Cuba and Evo Morales of Bolivia.

Illegal colonisers threaten indigenous lands
A Nicaragua Network delegation that visited the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) in March found that although ‘Nicaragua has advanced more than any other country in the recognition of the indigenous land rights including demarcation and titling. However, the removal of illegal colonisers and the prevention of further land invasions has barely begun.'

Nicaraguan interoceanic canal: from dream to reality?
In June 2013, Nicaragua’s National Assembly granted a 50-year concession to the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Investment Co (HKND) to conduct a feasibility study and build a 250km inter-oceanic canal. The US$40billion canal would be able to handle the world’s largest ships, including the 10 percent of the global merchant fleet already too large for the Panama canal. The project would include two deep water ports, free trade zones, a railway, oil and gas pipeline and two airports. After the first year, Nicaragua would have a 1% stake in the consortium, with its share increasing by 10% a decade so that it would control 99% of the shares after 100 years.

Despite significant economic growth and reductions in poverty, Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the Americas after Haiti. The Sandinista government sees such mega projects as critical to Nicaragua’s economic and social development. President Ortega’s Secretary for Public Policy Paul Oquist claims that the canal would mean reductions in dependence on foreign aid, an increase in GDP from 5% in 2013 to 15% in 2015, and the creation of up to 600,000 jobs. Trade unions also welcome the canal as a way of out of poverty. According to FSLN deputy and general secretary of the National Workers Front (FNT) Gustavo Porras, ‘Environmentalists who are speaking about this are not taking into account that there is enormous poverty here and that the real danger to our country is this continuing level of poverty.'

Jorge Huete-Perez, the president of the Nicaraguan Academy of Science, in an article in New Scientist 29 March, 2014, expressed concern that the project could create an environmental disaster in Nicaragua and beyond. He commented: ‘The excavation of hundreds of kilometres from coast to coast, traversing Lake Nicaragua, the largest drinking-water reservoir in the region, will destroy around 400,000 hectares of rainforests and wetlands.'

Under current plans the only environmental impact study is the one being carried out by a British company Environmental Resources Management contracted by HKND. Jorge Huete-Perez, Jaime Incer (government advisor on the environment), and environmental NGOs are calling for an independent impact study.

The Violence of Development
Resource Depletion, Environmental Crises and Human Rights Abuses in Central America

by Martin Mowforth

published by Pluto Press

This book examines the failure of ‘development’ in Central America, where despite billions of dollars of funding and positive indicators of economic growth, poverty remains entrenched and violence endemic. Martin Mowforth demonstrates how ‘development’ is predicated on systematic violence, through which the world’s most powerful governments, financial institutions and companies punish the global south. The analysis is based on case studies and over sixty interviews with politicians, NGOs, trade unionists, indigenous leaders, human rights defenders and nuns.

Martin Mowforth lectures at the University of Plymouth and is an activist in the Environmental Network for Central America (ENCA).

£24.99 from Pluto Press

www.plutobooks.com/display.asp?
K=9780745333946
Falling prices, climate change and leaf rust affect coffee

It costs Nicaraguan farmers US$125 to produce a hundred pounds of coffee for which they receive US$103. On top of falling prices, farmers are facing production losses because of leaf rust. Fatima Ismael, general manager of the Union of Cooperatives SOPPEXCCA, reports that ‘climate change is hitting us hard through the spread of the rust epidemic. Since 2010 this fungus has really taken hold because we have had more rain and higher temperatures. Leaf rust used to affect only 3% to 5% of the coffee bushes, but in 2013 it was 40%.’ Fatima goes on to explain ways in which farmers have begun to diversify crops to avoid the proliferation of the rust fungus and increase the fertility of the soil by planting cocoa which needs the same shady conditions as coffee bushes but also nourishes the soil.

Further information:
www.streetchildworldcup.org/rio-2014/

Tourism expansion

According to the Nicaraguan Tourist Board (INTUR) 1.2 million tourists visited Nicaragua in 2013, an increase of 9 per cent on 2012. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the EU are investing in tourist projects including modernising the port of San Juan del Sur and 19 initiatives on the ‘colonial and the volcano’ tourist routes.

Constitutional amendments establish quotas for women

Amendments to the constitution came into effect on at the end of January. The key changes reflect the expansion of territorial waters in the Caribbean recognised by the World Court in 2012; the removal of term limits for all elected posts; and a clause that states that women must make up half of each party’s slate for all elected posts at national and local levels.

UK – Central American trade

On 5 March, 150 British companies attended a UK – Central America trade conference in London. The event, organised by Central American diplomatic missions, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Central American Business Council, focused on opportunities for British companies and investors in renewable and conventional energy, transport infrastructure, oil and gas, agriculture and retail. FCO Minister, Rt. Hon. Hugo Swire MP, commented: ‘Central America is a region with a bright economic future and we want to encourage more British companies to trade with and invest in Central America, which has a market of over 52 million people.’ Nicaraguan minister Paul Oquist visited London at the end of April to promote business opportunities related to the interoceanic canal.

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Action against Hunger International reported on the impact of the coffee rust on the food security of seasonal coffee pickers where 90,000 of the usual 300,000 jobs have been lost. The study revealed that the living conditions of the families of many pickers have dropped from poverty to extreme poverty.
UK–Nicaragua Solidarity

NSC Runners
Adrian Smith, Liam Embiiss, Helen Shannon, and Rafe Holmes (pictured) completed the London marathon. Jason Rose, Barnabas Crean and Alex Ridgway also participated. Together they hope to raise £7,000 for NSC’s work in the UK and the Rehabilitation and Adaptive Design Workshops for people with disabilities in Tipitapa, Nicaragua.

www.tipitapa.org

Wales NSC launches own brand Nicaraguan coffee
After a successful delegation to Nicaragua last year, the Campaign has concentrated on improving communications with supporters through the social media, and launching its own brand of coffee. The Campaign seeks to reach as many people as possible in Wales to keep them up to date with developments in Nicaragua and promote Wales NSC events such as our March screening of ‘Big Boys Go Bananas’ in Blaenau Ffestiniog. Last summer we launched our own coffee, tecafé (“tecaf” is the Welsh word for ‘fairest’) in partnership with Etico, and we’re now on course to sell 1,000 bags during the first twelve months. In addition we are developing a twinning relationship with the Bluefields Sound System and hope to strengthen this link when we visit with our next delegation in February 2015.

Further information:
benica@gn.apc.org
www.walesnicaragua.wordpress.com
nicaraguacymru

Reading celebrates 20 years of solidarity with San Francisco Libre
Marian Grimes and 22 runners from the Meteorology Department at Reading University successfully completed the Reading half marathon, raising almost £3,000 the David Grimes Trust. Marian is the sister of David Grimes, a founder member of the group who died in 2011. On 3 March the Mayor of Reading, Cllr Marian Livingstone, hosted a special event attended by more than 50 people to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Association. Speakers also included San Francisco Libre community leader Jimmy Zamora and Guisell Morales from the Nicaraguan Embassy.

www.sanfranciscolibre.org/?p=1915

Nicaraguan Fairtrade producer Margarita Espinoza is a star in Bristol
Fairtrade (FT) coffee producer Margarita Espinoza spent two very intensive, productive weeks in Bristol over FT Fortnight. Organised by Bristol Link with Nicaragua and Bristol and South Glos FT Network, the visit included over 40 events reaching over 2,000 children and adults and attracted huge press and media coverage. Margarita also spoke about the benefits of the FT premium for her family and community at the South West Fairtrade business awards. Almost 100 people attended the BLINC and Bristol Fairtrade Network’s celebration of International Women’s Day where Margarita spoke of her work empowering the poorest rural campesinas in the mountains of Jinotega. Margarita’s visit was the latest of nine Nicaraguan women Fairtrade coffee, honey and sesame producers to Bristol during Fairtrade Fortnight.

www.bristolnicaragua.wordpress.com

NEW Nicaraguan documentary film ‘At home, in bed, in the streets’ (En la casa, la cama y la calle) 35 minutes.
This documentary tells of how Nicaraguan women’s rights group Puntos de Encuentro powerfully combined producing successful TV dramas with community organising to campaign to end sexual violence at home, in bed and in the streets. The film has received wide acclaim at the London Feminist film festival, and at international women’s day events in Bristol and London. DVDs available from NSC at nsc@nicaraguasc.org.uk: £10 including p&p. Please note that the DVDs are in NTSC format so cannot be played on older DVD players.
Sheffield Esteli Week Festivities

From samba to rumba, poetry to films, photo exhibitions to mural painting... all this and more featured in the second ‘Esteli Week,’ organised by the Sheffield Esteli Society and Sheffield Students for Esteli.

The Sheffield University Samba Band brought Latin beats to the concourse, while the Latin American and Ballroom society put on a dazzling display of Rumba. Professor P. Swanson introduced Sheffield to the lyrical poetry of internationally renowned Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario, and the poetry society used poems by FAREM University students in Esteli to inspire their own poems. Once again our friends at Son de América supported us, running Nicaraguan dance workshops for children and adults.

Highlights included inviting the public to design piñatas and murals in the Winter Gardens, and a photography exhibition that showcased the talent of two rising stars of our cities: Amy Wells from Sheffield and Frida Guez from Esteli.

The Sheffield Esteli Society held a film showing of ‘Nicaraguan film ‘La Yuma’, supported by Three Bears Kitchen, selling delicious Nicaraguan ‘enchiladas’ in support of the twinning.

www.sheffieldestelisociety@yahoo.co.uk
or
studentsforesteli@sheffield.ac.uk
www.sheffieldestel.org.uk

Performers Without Borders (PWB) return to Nicaragua

Six circus performers from Britain and the US returned to Nicaragua in January for their second tour. Emily, Bags, Jake, Justin, Aileen and Valentina spent three months teaching performing arts to vulnerable children from the School of Comedy and Mime in Granada, El Barrilete in Leon and Los Quinchos in San Marcos.

The NSC also organised for them to spend two days in Managua where they gave four performances which included return visits to schools supported by the Islington Managua Friendship Association and the Santa Rosa Fund.

Jake, a slack rope walker and juggler, said of the experience ‘This is the most rewarding work that I have ever done, it inspires me in my teaching practice and the children here are simply amazing’

www.performerswithoutborders.org.uk
www.santarosafund.org
www.imfa.org.uk

Celebrating the Misa Campesina in Oxford

For the past 20 years the Oxford Leon Association has organised an annual performance of the Nicaraguan ‘Misa Campesina’ (peasant mass). The music, composed by Carlos Mejía Godoy, celebrates the struggles of the poor against social, economic and political injustice in the context of liberation theology. Based on Nicaraguan folk traditions, it is full of lively rhythms, often loud, but at times slow and moving and the words reflect the lives of the poor and their faith. The Oxford Leon Association organises performances in early May at Blackfriars Priory; all welcome.

www.oxleonlink.org.uk

Obituary

Jill Edbrooke, a great friend of Nicaragua, died aged 54 on 29 December 2013 after a very sudden and short battle with cancer.

Jill went to Nicaragua in 1996 and spent four years as a Catholic Institute for International Relations cooperante working with women and young people in the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG) in Esteli and the Grupo Venancia in Matagalpa. Even when back in her hometown of Shrewsbury and travelling the world as a Senior Lecturer and Consultant at the Centre for International Development and Training in the University of Wolverhampton, she kept strong ties with Nicaragua, visiting frequently. Her work on governance, gender and rights based approaches took her to over 34 countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

She embodied solidarity and supported people on a personal as well as a political level. We’ve never known such a selfless, generous, solidaria person. She is greatly missed by all who knew her. Hasta siempre compañera, hermana, amiga! Liz Light and Carmen Barreda

www.nicaraguasc.org.uk
www.performerswithoutborders.org.uk
www.imfa.org.uk
www.nscag.org
NSC www.nicaraguasc.org.uk
NSCAG www.nscag.org
Nicaragua-Solidarity www.nscag.org
Wales NSC www.walesnicaragua.wordpress.com
Twin towns and other groups with projects in Nicaragua www.nicaraguasc.org.uk/solidarity/twin-towns

Get in touch, get involved
I was immediately struck by the transformation that had occurred since the return of the Sandinistas to power in 2007. Despair had been replaced by optimism, misery by hope. The main purpose of my visit was to renew contacts with the National Workers Federation (FNT) and its affiliated unions, and to look at ways of strengthening relationships between Nicaraguan trade unions and their UK counterparts. All the trade unions I met spoke about the restoration of their rights following 17 years of neo-liberal governments that had seen mass privatisations, soaring unemployment and the decimation of the trade union movement.

Despite significant improvements, Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere after Haiti. Consequently, the trade unions see the fight against poverty as one of their main tasks. With unemployment at around 800,000, out of an economically active population of 3.2 million, the unions have prioritised job creation and improvements in working conditions.

A tripartite agreement between the unions, government and the private sector has been much criticised as having the potential to weaken the trade unions and give employers the upper hand. But since it came into force, the unions have been able to gain significant increases in public sector salaries, and have successfully fought against a proposed rise in the retirement age. The unions have recently achieved an average boost of 10.7% to the minimum wage.

Having suffered much harassment and discrimination, self-employed workers are organising into collectives under the umbrella of the Self Employed Workers Union (CTCP), and have the possibility of making a decent living for themselves and their families for the first time.

One of the highlights of my visit was participating in the International Women’s Day celebration organised by public sector union UNE. Almost 200 women danced, sang and took to the stage to speak about the new space that has been created for them to participate in society, at work and in public life.

The 50/50 law, introduced in January under constitutional reforms, is being fully implemented in the trade union movement, and has led to huge advances in gender equality and women’s empowerment. Women are beginning to play a much more active role in union work, and are putting themselves forward for leadership roles.

All the unions I spoke to explained that international support and solidarity, in particular from UK trade unions, had been critical in ensuring their survival during the years of neo-liberalism. They are now enjoying a period of membership growth, and are focusing on capacity building and recruiting more women and young people. However, they still lack resources, and international solidarity remains essential to making them stronger and more powerful.

Nicaraguan workers remain inspirational in terms of trying to build trade unions that can achieve the best possible deal for their members. I came away with the hope that we can continue our support for a people who have managed to survive and thrive against the odds. Their message remains one of hope and optimism, and they deserve our support as they seek to build a fair, equal and just society.

Nicaragua’s trade unions flourish again

Louise Richards, NSC’s trade union co-ordinator, returned from a March trip to Nicaragua much inspired by the advances of the trade unions.
Volunteering: Building ecostoves in the community of Las Manos

The International Citizenship Service (ICS) is a UK government funded programme providing opportunities for UK and national volunteers in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Amy Porter speaks to Tara O’Reilly, a gap year student, who participated in a ten week project through Progressio in Las Manos, a village near the Honduran border.

So Tara, the project sounds very exciting… Well, yes, but I didn’t know an awful lot about it before I left, except that it would be in Las Manos, about six hours drive from Managua, and we’d be staying with host families and constructing ecostoves.

How did you feel when you arrived? …it was a bit daunting! It began with a weeks’ training for our team of six young volunteers from UK and six Nicaraguan volunteers from Las Manos, together with a Nicaraguan group leader and a facilitator. Only one group member was bilingual. The rest of us from the UK had very limited Spanish and the national volunteers spoke just a few words of English, so at the start the group was a bit tense!

Why were the ecostoves needed? Progressio’s partner, the local municipality, had identified the need for new stoves as in many households they used inefficient, smoky stoves which is obviously very unhealthy. The new stoves were to be much more efficient and safer.

What challenges did you face? The biggest challenge was in the selection of beneficiary families. We spent two weeks surveying the community to identify those in greatest need, for example, households with lots of children or elderly family members. We also considered how many people worked and how much land the family owned. When the beneficiaries were announced, some families didn’t understand why they hadn’t been chosen, so we had to explain to everybody.

Progressio claims that ‘Our whole way of working is about sharing skills with people in poor communities so they can overcome the problems they face’. With this in mind, how did the project work out? The 25 ecostoves were received very well by the beneficiary families and the Nicaraguan volunteers are planning to build 25 more. We had to train people to use them, so we really got to know people and integrated into the local community. One family had a small business selling food, and they told us that the new stove was so efficient that they were able to make and sell much more food, which meant they benefited economically as well. We also held some talks in a local school on topics such as health and gender.

How was your relationship with the host family? They were incredibly warm and welcoming. They own a coffee farm, but I learned a lot about their history and how incredibly hard life was for them during the Sandinista conflict. The fighting saw my host ‘father’ travel to fight, whilst my host ‘mother’ worried terribly about him. They’re so happy to have made a life together having lived through such danger and uncertainty.

What are your overall reflections from the trip? We had a group reflection session on the last day, and we all felt that we’d developed personally. Something in common for all of us, both UK and Nicaraguan volunteers, was that our confidence had improved. Whilst leaving all of the friends I’d made behind and going back home was hard, the experience certainly made me very grateful for all of the opportunities that I have in the UK.

Was there a highlight for you? My Spanish was almost non-existent at the beginning of the trip and I was very nervous, but I got better as the weeks went by. One of the national volunteers was incredibly shy and hardly spoke any English. …on the last day she came and asked me “What’s the time?” in English, and I was able to reply in Spanish, that was a great feeling!