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Nicaragua

Faced with Nicaragua's social and political crisis - Solidarity with popular demands and against Ortegista repression!

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The Sandinista Popular Revolution

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was born as a "vanguard organization" with an anti-imperialist and revolutionary orientation, as established in its Historic Programme (1969), "capable of taking political power (...) establishing a social system that wipes out the exploitation and poverty that our people have been subjected to in past history."

When the Somoza dictatorship was defeated in July 1979, the FSLN had the broad support of the bulk of the population and tried to lay the objective and subjective foundations of a revolutionary project of a socialist character, although there were great challenges to face in a country with a highly dependent economy and a profound social destructuring, not to mention the counterrevolution that the United States promoted in the 1980s, which was decisive in this stage of Sandinism. The Fourth International immediately celebrated the overthrow of the dictatorship and was in full solidarity with the revolutionary popular movement.

Aware that radical economic and social transformations would be gradual, the FSLN promoted a Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional where the Sandinista bloc and the bourgeoisie were represented. It was therefore proclaimed that the principles of the revolution were the mixed economy, political pluralism and non-alignment, as necessary strategies in the short term.

In the long term, the Historic Programme of the FSLN was the general framework to be developed, although it was not carried out in its entirety, leaving important deficits with respect to women's emancipation (in particular leaving untouched the restrictive abortion laws which only permitted terminations if a woman's life was at risk) or the demands of the peasantry, as well as very serious errors such as respecting the foreign debt contracted by Somoza and the implementation of monetarist policies at the end of the 1980s. Nevertheless from 1988, the Sandinista leaders introduced a structural adjustment plan that degraded the conditions of the poor without affecting the rich. These policies very much resembled the usual conditions imposed by the IMF and World Bank while at the same time, under pressure from Washington, the two institutions had suspended their aid to the Sandinista authorities. These adjustment policies were very much criticized by certain tendencies within the FSLN because they burdened the popular classes with the adjustment effort.

However, the Programme of the FSLN did include the construction of a Revolutionary Government that allowed full participation of the whole population, both at the national and local level, respect for human rights, freedom to organize the union movement in the cities and countryside, the freedom to organize groups of peasants, youth, students, women, etc. Latifundios were expropriated, land was redistributed and trade unions and peasant associations were formed. There was also the nationalization of factories, buildings and other assets of the Somoza oligarchy.

During the following eleven years, education was generalized, the university was opened to the popular classes, social assistance programs were created and a universal health system and other basic services were set in motion, and Sandinista Defence Committees (CDS) were launched to organize the population of the neighbourhoods.

The FSLN also established a fair tax policy, labour rights, and historic social justice for the Caribbean Coast, because of the exploitation and discrimination against native indigenous peoples. It was therefore a socialism-oriented programme that prepared the material conditions for it, with tactical and strategic approaches, which, despite the difficulties of the context and the threat of U.S. imperialism, opened new promises of rupture with the hegemonic system.

However, the agrarian reform did not go far enough: the expropriations focused mainly on the assets of Somoza and his allies, and spared the interests of major capitalist groups and powerful families whom certain Sandinista leaders wanted to turn into allies or fellow travellers. Furthermore, instead of giving priority to small and medium farms, the FSLN quickly created a State agrarian sector and cooperatives, which was not in line with the attitudes of the rural population, parts of which became attracted by the counterrevolutionary Contras.

Self-organization and workers' control were not encouraged enough. Part of the FSLN leadership was trained in Cuba in the 1960s-1970s, which, under the influence of the Stalinized Soviet Union, was then promoting popular organization within a very controlled and limited framework. As a result, the masses could not fully participate in their own emancipation.

The betrayal of the FSLN's Historic Programme and the establishment of an authoritarian corporate regime

When the FSLN was defeated electorally in 1990, the new international situation favoured the right, capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe deprived Nicaragua of international allies. But people were also increasingly discouraged by the direction the revolutionary process was taking. In the Sandinista rank and file there was uneasiness due to the bureaucratization and verticalism of the National Directorate of the FSLN, which elected the members of the CDS, union posts, territorial cadres and intermediate commanders. Gradually, the absence of democratization in these structures led to the development of a bureaucratic Sandinista leadership that enjoyed privileges that contrasted with the reality of the great majority who were asked to make economic and social sacrifices in the name of the revolution.

When the main commanders of the National Directorate, public offices and middle management grabbed – in what is popularly known as the *piñata* – the lands, coffee plantations, mansions, haciendas, automobiles and other state properties that the revolution had taken over in the name of the vast majority, this malaise deepened. The arguments presented by the Commandantes were that this was to prevent the enemy from taking possession of what had cost so much blood, but this was not enough to explain to the population the personal enrichment of the then incipient Sandinista bourgeoisie.

Subsequently, the FSLN under Daniel Ortega adopted an attitude that swung back and forth between compromise and confrontation with the government of the National Opposition Union (UNO) of Violeta Chamorro. The National Directorate of the FSLN, controlled mostly by Daniel Ortega's Democratic Left current, on the one hand encouraged the struggles against privatizations, while on the other, in the National Assembly, it supported the Chamorro government that carried them out.

At the end of the 1990s, Ortega concluded a pact with the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) of Arnoldo Alemán, who had been President since 1997, in a sort of coexistence with the most conservative and corrupt right wing. These were "dangerous friendships" for a revolutionary project. However they were profitable for Daniel Ortega's FSLN and Alemán's PLC, who obtained different benefits from such pacts. This was seen with the PLC's support of

Ortega faced with the denunciation of the sexual abuse of his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez. And years later, when Alemán, who had been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for the galloping corruption of his government, was allowed to serve out his sentence under house arrest thanks to the men Ortega had placed in the judicial system, until the Supreme Court quashed the conviction in 2009 during Ortega's presidency.

The reform of the Electoral Law in the year 2000, promoted by Sandinista and liberal deputies was another product of the Ortega-Alemán pact. The reform allowed the presidency and vice-presidency of the Republic to be won with a minimum of 35% and outstripping the second place candidates by a difference of five percentage points. This new Electoral Law allowed for Daniel Ortega, who had lacked enough support since 1990, to be elected in 2006 with 38.07% of the votes.

As part of the opposition, the Sandinista parliamentary group voted in 2006, in agreement with the conservative deputies, for a law that completely prohibits abortion. They did so as part of the pact with the right wing that allowed the FSLN to return to the presidency of the republic with the elections at the end of 2006. And it was under the presidency of Daniel Ortega – who refused to reverse the law – that this prohibition was included in the new penal code that came into force in 2008. This prohibition does not allow for any exceptions, even if the health or life of the pregnant woman is in danger, or the pregnancy is the result of rape.

This move accompanied the progress made in consolidating other dangerous friendships: this time, with a former FSLN adversary, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, whom Ortega reinstated to public life as President of the Peace and Reconciliation Commission, a body set up to ensure that those demobilized from war complied with the agreements. This was the beginning of another privileged relationship between Ortega's FSLN and the de facto powers. In order to win the votes of the conservatives, Daniel Ortega married Rosario Murillo in church before the election of November 2006, with Cardinal Obando officiating.

It was also after Ortega's return to the government that the FSLN formalized the agreements with COSEP, establishing an alliance between these two sectors, presented as a space for tripartite agreement between the government, the private sector and the unions. However, the participation of the unions was token, since they had been co-opted by the interests of the FSLN, that is, the Ortega-Murillo tandem, as evidenced by the positions of the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (CST) in cases of workers' struggles against large employers such as the Pellas family or the minimum wage agreements. Thus, little by little, from the formulation of laws to wage negotiations, the Nicaraguan political economy was subordinated to the interests of the big national capital. However, a pact of this nature cannot be restricted to big national capital, since its own dynamic leads to transnational capital, in particular to the extractive industry and, above all, to mining. Underlying all this is the neoliberal logic prevailing in the region: the channelling of public resources to private investments, the outsourcing and privatization of services, tax exemptions and benefits for capital, etc.

The free trade agreement with the United States was adopted in 2005. Although the FSLN parliamentary group, then in opposition, voted against its ratification in October 2005, in 2006, FSLN parliamentarians supported changes in a series of laws that allowed the conditions imposed by the US to be confirmed. Moreover, once in power from 2007, Daniel Ortega's government did not attempt at all to repeal this free trade agreement with the US superpower. This was a further shift in the FSLN's orientation as it had previously accused the government of President Enrique Bolaños of subjugating Nicaragua to Washington's economic interests. The approval of this treaty by the FSLN MPs was accompanied by support for changes in a whole series of laws to conform to the conditions imposed by the USA. Other free-trade treaties were approved with the FSLN's support: a treaty with Taiwan (which came into force in 2008), one concerning Central America with Mexico (2011) and another between Central America and the European Union (2012).

In 2006, Nicaragua was a beneficiary of debt relief within the framework of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

initiative – the IMF cancelled \$206 million of Nicaragua's debt. When Ortega came back to government in 2007, the IMF programme was over and the Fund saw no necessity to sign a new one as it considered Nicaragua's debt to be sustainable. Daniel Ortega's government nevertheless insisted on implementing a new programme in order to attract foreign investors. The IMF eventually agreed, demanding from the government to deepen the neoliberal policies pursued by the Right and to apply fiscal austerity in order to have a primary fiscal surplus.

Thus the Bretton Woods institutions have no reason to reproach the Nicaraguan government. The IMF notes "Nicaragua's success in maintaining macroeconomic stability" (March 2016). During the last visit of its technical staff (February 2018), this organization has declared that "economic performance in 2017 was above expectations and the 2018 outlook is favourable". As for the World Bank, it chose the very moment in April 2018 when Ortega's government had just announced neoliberal measures concerning social security to congratulate Ortega on his sound economic policies. In other words, Nicaragua has functioned within the guidelines that these organizations impose on the region.

All this has been possible with FSLN majority control of the Assembly. In addition, in November 2013, Ortega introduced an initiative for a Law to Reform the Constitution of the Republic, which included the proposal to elect the President with a "relative majority" of votes, independent of the percentage achieved, and to allow indefinite presidential re-election. Currently, Ortega's FSLN has absolute control of the Assembly, with 71 deputies out of a total of 92.

But there remain two great betrayals by the FSLN of its Historic Programme that cannot be left unmentioned. The first is the demobilization and destruction of the grassroots organizational fabric and of the large social movements, mostly co-opted by the regime. This takes place through control at different levels, from the legal normative, with the ban on standing in elections with independent lists, and by the control exercised through the Councils of Citizen Power (CPC), which are vertical forms of organization that pursue the control of citizens for the purposes of power of the presidential couple.

The other betrayal is of women's rights which, given the total prohibition of abortion, the reform of the law of male violence, the persecution of the feminist movement critical of the regime, impunity for years of sexual abuse of Zoilamérica, etc., challenges the entire political and social system built around Ortegismo. In 2012, after a major campaign by grassroots women's organizations – which started at the time of the revolution – Nicaragua introduced Law 779 against violence against women. This law removed the previous requirement for mediation in cases of abuse. This law was the result of a progressive campaign, but there was a reactionary one against it, driven by the Catholic hierarchy which labelled it as "anti-family". This resulted in the law being seriously weakened by an amendment reintroducing compulsory mediation 15 months after it was first passed, with no resistance from the FSLN.

Feminist and worker-peasant based fronts of struggle. State repression as a response.

At this point, it has been demonstrated that the Historic Programme of the FSLN, committed to rights and equality among people, is contradictory to the drift taken by Ortegismo. Within all the open fronts of struggle, it has been the women's movements, critical of the government, who have not given up on the denunciation of the changes to Law 779, which reduces femicide to the realm of the relations of heterosexual couples or which includes mediation with aggressors as a mechanism for conflict resolution. In other words, the law has been vilified, as are the bodies of Nicaraguan women exposed to these laws or demonstrating in the streets for their rights.

Other fronts are located in the fight against extractivism and there are different examples of conflicts between the accumulation of capital and the sustainability of life itself, derived from the incompatibility that extractivism has as an engine of development that does not benefit the great majority, nor the communities that suffer its negative effects, as was seen in Rancho Grande or Mina El Limón. In both cases, in the face of community organization and mobilization, the response has been repression. The same happens with mining, hydroelectric and agribusiness projects.

But of all these projects that are a threat to communities and the environment, there is one that has provoked an important mobilization, nationally and internationally that Ortega has not been able to hide: the projected construction of an inter-oceanic canal that proposes to split the country and the region in two, from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, crossing Lake Nicaragua, the main freshwater reserve in Central America. In this case, the response has been the persecution, repression and stigmatization of social movements.

Thus, the government, which serves the interests of private capital (whether owned by local "traditional" capitalists, or bureaucratic or foreign ones) not only acts to repress the people in favour of the transnationals, but is also complicit in the destruction of the environment and guilty of widespread violations of human rights.

April 2018 and the popular mobilization against the regime: Ortegaismo crosses the rubicon.

Eleven years have passed since Ortega's return to government, a time in which enough social discontent has accumulated for two events to trigger the upsurge of April 2018: the government's inaction in the face of the Indio Maíz Reserve fire and the proposed reform of the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS). This reform would have cut current pension benefits by 5%, limited the indexation of the pensions over the inflation rate, and introduced cuts to future pensions for around one million wage-earners that could have been as high as 13%.

The social outburst brought the gaze of the international community onto Nicaragua and the popular discontent against the regime.

On April 18, demonstrations and protests erupted spontaneously and peacefully in important cities, such as León and Managua, and were immediately violently repelled by the government. Various human rights reports refer to organized pro-government groups or "shock forces" recruited from the Sandinista Youth, in addition to riot police. This disproportionate use of violence fed the protests and mobilizations of April 19 through the so-called "autoconvocados": that is young people, students, workers, etc., who organized takeovers of streets and cities through the "tranques". This gradually spread through the country to cities like Masaya, Granada, Matagalpa, Rivas and Estelón, adding to other collectives and movements. Since that day, the government of Ortega-Murillo has continued with police and military repression and, in particular, the actions of paramilitary groups, which have indiscriminately shot the population. These groups are masked, heavily armed and operate in full impunity, in the daylight and alongside police forces. This indicates that they act in full agreement with the regime.

On April 22, given the broad participation in the demonstrations, Ortega cancelled the INSS reform. On April 24, the Government agreed to initiate a National Dialogue through the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, composed of civil society organizations, students, peasants and even the business sector, and with the Catholic Church as mediator, with the goal of resolving the conflict. At that time, the social movements already had clear demands for establishing dialogue: no negotiation without the cessation of repression, a guarantee of justice and reparation for the demonstrators killed in the previous days, and the departure of the Ortega-Murillo duo from power, as a

non-negotiable objective. The demand of the social movements was thus to negotiate a post-Ortega transition. However, after insisting on these points, the government decided to suspend the dialogue. For the social mobilization, to continue negotiating in this context would have meant a reinforcement of Ortegismo and its repressive regime.

At the same time, there has been a rapid response from state institutions to legitimize repression, for example, with the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Law, which criminalizes and persecutes specific profiles of leaders of social movements. Thousands of exiles and more than 400 dead, as well as the expulsion of national and international human rights organizations, including the UN itself, show the point of no return at which the regime has arrived. After the massive use of terror meant to repress and intimidate the population, the government took back control of the streets by the middle of July. Since then, several hundred people, labelled as "terrorists" by the government, have been arrested and are still imprisoned, with their rights not respected – the associations of defence of human rights are not allowed to access the prisons, nor are the lawyers of some detainees. Some of them have been intimidated and tortured in order to force them to give false confessions that would support the claim that the government faces a plot to remove it by force.

As a result of the repression, sections of the population have been sufficiently intimidated that they do not take part in street protests. Nevertheless, many demonstrations have been organized, but they have not gathered as many participants as between April and July 2018. They have been organized by a diversity of movements and organizations: Articulation of Social Movements and Civil Society Organizations, Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy, Student Movements, April 19 Movements (throughout the country), community-based organizations, Mothers of April, Political Prisoners Committees, Women's Movements and feminist networks, LGTBQI collectives, University, unions and independent trade associations ... But there is a consensus that Ortega and Murillo must leave the government and the need to rebuild Sandinismo without Ortega.

But all these organizations are also against external interference that seeks a way out of the conflict towards an "Ortegismo sin Ortega"; that is, the maintenance of a clientelist structure that safeguards the economic interests of national and transnational capital. Hence, one of the major current challenges for the movements is the debate and consensus on that transition and roadmap and that actors such as COSEP, currently key to the exit of Ortega-Murillo, do not pose a threat to an emancipatory social and economic project.

At this point of no return, the regime is using anti-imperialist rhetoric to portray an attempt at a "soft coup d'état" as has occurred in other countries in the region. The current orthodox anti-imperialism is reduced to a useful screen for self-legitimization on the international stage, but it reduces a conflict with deep and complex roots in the national reality to external interference. Internally, it benefits only a group of people privileged enough not to suffer the worst effects of the regime they have constructed in Nicaragua.

A section of the international left supports this view of the conflict. It considers imperialist powers – starting with the United States and their allies in the region – to be largely responsible for destabilising the country, and that a dominant sector of the protest movement is being led or manipulated by the reactionary right. This part of the international left is suspicious of reports asserting that the regime bears the main responsibility for the hundreds of deaths that resulted from these dramatic events, or even considers these as outright false claims.

Yet Ortega and his supporters cannot prove this so-called attempted coup d'état. Most demonstrators have not used terrorist methods. The government cannot prove the involvement of a single foreign mercenary. No sector of the army has been denounced by Ortega for supporting the idea of a coup, and in the last analysis the army has stayed on the side of the regime up to now.

Faced with the facts presented here, it is simply fallacious to see soft coups d'état in the Nicaraguan case. It is

equally irresponsible to argue that current mobilizations can be reduced to vandalism by some, or that human rights, and especially women's rights, are objects of negotiation or currencies of exchange for any society. This is even less the case for the society that we aspire to build as a revolutionary left. It is also fallacious to present Ortega's government as a socialist or leftist government, given the policies which have been implemented for the last eleven years in favour of capital – as is shown in the support of the IMF, the World Bank and big capital for Ortega, as well as the support from capitalist powers, including US imperialism, until the repression became too strong for them to continue supporting the regime publicly. No people has to be satisfied with less than the noblest aspirations of freedoms, democracy, social justice and human rights that it has achieved, in this case, synthesized in the Sandinista ideals. The logic of the lesser evil ends up being the shortest way to the greater evil!

For all these reasons, the Fourth International, which from the beginning built solidarity with the Sandinista Revolution, supports the leftist and democratic sectors of the resistance, rebellion and popular power against the current Ortega regime and demonstrates solidarity with the sectors struggling to refound a Sandinismo that is anti-capitalist, democratic and respectful of human rights, and that is capable of getting rid of the neoliberal and repressive despotism that is crushing the Nicaraguan popular classes.

Stop the repression of Nicaraguan popular movements! Immediate liberation of all political prisoners!

For women's rights! Legalize abortion now!

Down with the criminal neoliberal regime of Ortega-Murillo!

Against any kind of imperialist interference in Nicaragua's internal affairs! For the right of the people in Nicaragua, in Central America and beyond to take their fate into their own hands!

For the Sandinista refoundation! Towards an ecosocialist alternative to the extractivist export-oriented model and to the capitalist system, which implies a break that needs the highest level of democracy and self-organisation!

We will articulate these demands in a campaign of internationalist solidarity with the victims of the repression in Nicaragua.

Executive Bureau of the Fourth International

Amsterdam 28 October 2018

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