AUSTRALIAN SOLIDARITY WITH CENTRAL AMERICA

By Peter Ross

Solidarity work with the Nicaraguan revolution was first organised in Australia as a response to the success of the Sandinistas in taking power in July 1979. Early efforts concentrated on raising funds for the reconstruction of the country which had been devastated by the civil war, and on informing Australians about Nicaragua and the aims and progress of the revolution. Latin Americans living in Australia were particularly prominent in this early stage.

Other events in the region led the solidarity movement to broaden its perspectives and objectives. While Nicaragua remained a priority, support was also advanced to the revolutionary government of Grenada, and the revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Guatemala. Less money was raised, but important work was done in disseminating information about the Nicaraguan situation, particularly the destabilising role being played by the government of the United States.

Many Australians travelled to Nicaragua and links were built up between that country and the Australian solidarity movement. The Resource and Action Committee for Latin America (RACLA) undertook an aid project to fund a pre-school on a state coffee farm in the northern Nicaraguan province of Jinotega. In Melbourne, on the initiatives of members of the Latin American Information Centre (LAIC), Northcote Council established sister city ties with a town in Nicaragua. Community Aid Abroad took on a project to fund a women's co-operative in the Atlantic Coast region.

It was not until 1984, however, that the revolutionary government sent representatives to Australia. In March, the Australian government invited a Nicaraguan trade delegation to Australia. Headed by the Minister for Trade, the team had wide ranging talks with Australian officials concerning the possibilities of developing closer trading links. This invitation reflects a change of policy on the part of the Australian government towards Nicaragua, since the ALP's coming to power. Diplomatic relations between the two countries have also been upgraded.

In May, RACLA hosted the tour to Australia of Comandante Doris Tijerino and two officials from the Department of International Relations, Orando Gomez and Daniel Ortega. In their lightning visit of five days, which included Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, the trio were able to meet a wide range of people involved in solidarity work, as well as representatives from unions, churches, aid organisations, the media, and political parties.

Tijerino emphasised that now, more than ever, Nicaragua needs strong support. CIA-funded counter-revolutionary raids, including air attacks and the mining of Nicaragua's harbours, have taken their toll of the economy. The RACLA pre-school, to give an example that strikes a chord at home, has already been destroyed once by the contras. It is now being rebuilt. The threat of a full-scale US invasion remains.

A feature of Doris Tijerino's visit was the warmth of the welcome extended by many Australians. Not only did capacity crowds attend the public meetings, but organisations and individuals generously helped in organising and funding the tour.

After covering expenses, over $1,000 remains to be sent to the RACLA pre-school project. On top of this, a number of direct contributions were made to Nicaragua via the visitors. Notable among these were $2,500 from the Communist Party of Australia from an voluntary levy on its members, $1,000 from a member of the gay peace group, Enola Gay, and $100 from the Blue Mountains Marxist Discussion Group.

Such amounts, small as they may be by Australian terms, are significant for Nicaragua. They enable the revolution to build the infrastructure of the new Nicaragua. They are also a palpable sign to all Nicaraguans that even countries as remote as Australia have people who realise the importance of the revolution and are willing to support it in every way they can.

Further information on solidarity work in Australia can be obtained from:

- Resource and Action Committee for Latin America (RACLA), PO Box 265, Broadway 2007.
- Latin American Information Centre (LAIC), 183 Gertrude St, Fitzroy 3065.
- Central American Support committee (CASC), PO Box 17, Rundle Mall, Adelaide 5000.
- Committee in Solidarity with Central America Campaigna (CISCAC), PO Box A431, Sydney South 2000.

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