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NICARAGUA

Teachers March for Higher Wages

On 8 Feb, 20,000 teachers, students and workers took to the streets in protest of the government's failure to deliver long overdue salary increases promised to the nation's educators. After several days of strikes, the government has done little more than offer excuses, threats and insults to the severely underpaid public workers.

Nicaraguan primary school teachers earn a base salary of \$69.50 a month, and secondary school teachers earn \$73.20 a month. The average salary for teachers in Central America is about \$375 a month. Relative to the country's cost of living, Nicaraguan teachers earn less than half the amount needed to support a family of four.

In '00, the government and educators negotiated and signed the National Education Plan, which sets a timetable for salary increases. According to the plan, teachers should presently be earning the equivalent of the basic cost-of-living index, and by '10 they should receive wages competitive with those offered in other Central American nations.

President Enrique Bolaños told the press in early Feb that he believes teachers deserve more money but that funds are lacking. Despite previous promises made to increase teachers' wages, he maintains that his hands are tied by agreements made with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The IMF was established with the goal of helping developing nations restore fiscal stability. The fund provides loans to indebted nations like Nicaragua provided they adhere to proscribed economic strategies. In general, these include liberalizing trade and cutting back on social spending. The IMF does not support a salary increase for Nicaragua's educators.

Other government negotiators have been less diplomatic than the president. On 4 Feb, the Minister of Labor declared the teachers' strike illegal and has since threatened to dismiss teachers and withhold salaries. "There are a lot of people who have the intellectual and academic qualifications to be teachers," said Education Minister Miguel Angel Garcia who believes the teachers are replaceable. "What's important is to have teachers who are truly concerned with teaching and not with politicking," he commented.

The secretary general of the National Association of Nicaraguan Teachers, José Antonio Zepada, responded to the threats by ridiculing the Minister of Education for believing that anybody could replace teachers. "They are not interested in the quality of education, but only with complying with IMF and World Bank mandates," stated Zepada.

Since the strike began, the tone of the conflict has become increasingly aggressive. Javier España, president of the Federation of Secondary Students, has pledged support for the peaceful protests. However, he stated that if the government does not grant the salary increases the students will resort to other means of protest.

Meanwhile, Bolaños has added fuel to the fire by accusing the teacher's union of acting out of its own self-interest. He publicly stated his belief that union leaders hoped to profit by raising membership fees with the success of the strike.

Nicaraguan Agriculture in Trouble

The nation's agriculture has not fared well so far this year, with coffee harvests producing an estimated 47% less than the previous year due to environmental and economic factors. As a result, significant increases in poverty and unemployment are expected. The effects will be felt markedly in the region of Matagalpa and Jinotega where 80% of Nicaragua's coffee is produced.

The situation is worse for the nation's small coffee producers who have no choice but to seek financing from small institutions that charge annual interest rates upwards of 70%. This situation has in the past radically altered the structure of the coffee industry in Nicaragua. According to one farmer, where 70% of the nation's coffee was once produced on small and medium farms, today 80% is produced on large farms.

Coffee producers have demanded financial aid from the government, threatening to protest publicly if action is not taken quickly. The government has recognized the gravity of the situation and correspondingly called emergency meetings. So far, no resolutions have been agreed upon.

Citrus producers have similarly demanded governmental aid. This year it is estimated that Nicaragua's citrus production will fall by up to 60%. Some argue that smoke from the Santiago Volcano is negatively affecting orange and mandarin production in the region of Concepción, where 50% of the nation's citrus is produced. Others claim that plant viruses and fungal infections are damaging or killing citrus trees.

Both citrus and coffee producers claim that their farms are badly maintained due to lack of financial resources.

Nicaraguan Missiles a Threat to U.S. Security?

Since an anti-aircraft missile was discovered in civilian hands on 12 Jan, Nicaragua has attracted increased attention from US security officials. Fears of Nicaraguan missiles falling into the "wrong hands" are by no means new (Vol. 24, No. 1). Since 11 Sep '01, the US has increasingly pressured

Nicaragua to eliminate its missile stocks, fearing that corrupt officials could sell the weapons to terrorists on the black market.

During Jan, US officials made their opinions known to the media. At a press conference, US Ambassador to Nicaragua Peter Brennan said that the Bush administration is alarmed by the recent discovery of a missile being sold on the black market. He further stated that US officials believe that terrorists are seeking the very weapons in question. A recent *Washington Post* article cited an anonymous US government source who accused the Nicaraguan military of being connected to the illegal weapons trade.

In Jan '04, President Bolaños destroyed 1,000 SAM-7 missiles. The president has announced his intention to go ahead with plans to further decrease missile stock piles despite accusations by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) that he is bowing to US pressure. However, since then, the National Assembly, dominated by a coalition of FSLN and Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) members, passed the *General Weapons Law*. The law requires that the president must have the approval of the National Assembly before scaling back the nation's weapons supply. Coalition members maintain that the military should be left to decide how many missiles are required to maintain a balance of power with its Central American neighbors.

While Nicaragua's political parties squabble over the nation's official armaments, missiles like the C2M seized in Managua remain at large. The investigations surrounding the 12 Jan seizure turned up the name of *ex-contra* "Cascabel" as a possible accomplice in the sale of the weapon.

In the face of the accusation, the former political director of the *contras*, Adolfo Calero Portocarrero, denied the possibility of *contra* weapons being sold on the black market. Calero maintains that the *contras* used US-manufactured Red Eye missiles, which were closely controlled by the CIA, and not Soviet manufactured missiles like SAM-7s (or C2Ms). However, despite tight CIA supervision, 15 Red Eye missiles disappeared from official inventories.

The head of the Nicaraguan Army, Gen. Javier Carrion, has publicly stated that the army "lost various missiles in combat." He further specified that C2Ms were among the lost missiles. However, according to *ex-contra* Santos Guerrero, on certain occasions the Nicaraguan Army would bury weapons as they fled *contra* forces. On one such occasion, he said, *contras* found a number of smaller, but more powerful, SAM-14 missiles. "Where are they now?" mused Guerrero.

At a recent conference, entitled "Global Dialogue on Terrorism and Human Rights," Nicaraguan delegate Francisco Obando affirmed that Nicaragua "is ready to confront and combat internal terrorism." He elaborated on Nicaragua's stance regarding its own war on terror by citing the *General Weapons Law* as an example, that Nicaragua will use legal instruments to sanction and prevent terrorism. "In Nicaragua terrorism can not be fought with terrorism," he said.

—Adam Kardos