



The lessons of Nicaragua's education system and the eradication of illiteracy

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By Logan Williams, NEU Activist & *Arise Festival*

As the Nicaraguan people celebrate the anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution over the corrupt Somoza

regime. It is logical to examine a key area of transformation post revolution, the Nicaraguan education system.

The merits of the Nicaraguan system are plain to see through the country having one of the highest educational progress rates in the world for women and a truly comprehensive system funded by the Nicaraguan government led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). In order to understand the Nicaraguan education system, it is necessary to examine both its foundations and the reality of education under the illegal US sanctions.

Education before the Revolution.

In the centuries preceding the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979, education in Nicaragua was not prioritised by US occupying forces or the Somoza dictatorship.

At the beginning of the revolution, it was believed that only fifty percent of the total population were literate with seventy-five to ninety percent of rural Nicaraguans being illiterate. These conditions were caused by the decade's long mismanagement of Nicaragua by the Somoza family which saw limited spending on public education with government money being syphoned into the personal bank accounts of the dictatorship and its allies. The continued dominance of the Somoza family saw the education of the rural and working classes fall by the wayside and a complete collapse in literacy rates.

As a result of this neglect throughout the mid to late-twentieth century, Nicaraguan revolutionaries led by Carlos Fonseca and Daniel Ortega prioritised a revolutionary upheaval of the Nicaraguan education system to one based on strong socialist ideals and, the example of the ground-breaking Cuban education system.

Education under the Revolution.

Following the revolution, the Sandinista National Liberation Front organised itself around a historical statement which offered policies on a variety of issues including education. The policies included within the FSLN Historical Statement sought to fundamentally transform Nicaraguan society away from its traditional organisation under the Somoza dictatorship. Instead, it sought to form a society which worked for all Nicaraguans rather than just its upper classes. The FSLN Historical Statement section on Education sought to offer a bold alternative to the stale policies offered by the Somoza dictatorship and included demands such as:

1. *"It will push forward a massive campaign to immediately wipe out illiteracy.*
2. *It will develop the national culture and will root out the neo-colonial penetration in our culture.*

3. *It will rescue the progressive intellectuals, and their works that have arisen throughout our history.*
4. *It will give attention to the development and progress of education at the various levels and, education will be free at all levels and obligatory at some levels.*
5. *It will grant scholarships at various levels of education to students who have limited economic resources.*
6. *It will train more and better teachers who have the scientific knowledge that the present requires.*
7. *It will nationalize the centres of private education that have been immorally turned into industries by merchants who hypocritically invoke religious principles.*
8. *It will adapt the teaching programs to the needs of the country”.*

Following the successful Sandinista revolution of 1979, the government organised across the broad spectrum of Nicaraguan society to deliver a ground-breaking literacy campaign across the country.

The revolutionary government's mobilisation included 60,000 young people (high school and college age) and around 30,000 adults of varying backgrounds. Each of these volunteers were provided with two weeks of training led by experienced Cuban educators for the five-month campaign. Following their two weeks of training the volunteers were organised into brigades named in honour of Cuban brigadistas from the 1959 Literacy campaign each of which were organised within the Popular Literacy Army.

These brigades across the five-month campaign taught over fifty percent of the Nicaraguan population to read and write through the provision of lessons within each town and village. The crusade was a sensational success, garnering the Nadezhda K. Krupskaya award from UNESCO in 1980 due to its role in reducing the illiteracy rate from over half the population to around 13 percent and, in encouraging the Nicaraguan population to value education which is demonstrated by the doubling of public-school enrolments between 1978 and 1982.

Education under the counter-revolution.

Despite the huge amount of progress made during the Sandinista revolution, the Ortega led FSLN government were replaced by the Chamorro administration in the 1990 election which led Nicaragua until 1997. Throughout this period, Chamorro oversaw the introduction of neoliberalism across Nicaragua. The introduction of this

political and economic ideology saw the implementation of school fees for state schools for the first time since the revolution; under the explicit conditions of an International Monetary Fund Loan, this led school attendance to decline rapidly due to the exclusion of working-class children as well as the dramatic rise of national adult illiteracy rates.

As well as a growing education divide between the working and upper class, it was possible to see a cavernous economic divide with the highest earning fifth of the population earning sixty five percent of the national income while the lowest earning fifth received a paltry three percent.

The educational divide created under the Chamorro administration continued until the end of the Bolanos administration in January 2007. This saw a collapse of educational outcomes for Nicaraguan children.

By the end of Bolanos' administration only half of all Nicaraguan children who started the first grade finished primary school, with the rest dropping out often because of their parents' inability to pay the nominal school fees or the need for the children to work to aid the family income.

Alongside, this decline in school outcomes illiteracy rose to thirty-six of the Nicaraguan population at the end of Bolanos' administration. As a result of the worsening economic divide between the upper and

working classes, numerous children were forced to work as beggars, prostitutes and, illegally as labourers in the farms and mines of Nicaragua.

Upon Ortega and the Sandinista National Liberation Front party's re-election to the presidency in 2007, they launched a second literacy crusade. The crusade was launched with the explicit target of eradicating illiteracy in the country immediately whilst bringing the educational attainment of every citizen to that of a primary school graduate, which less than half were under the previous neoliberal administrations.

The second literacy crusade consisted of fifty-four thousand volunteers delivering lessons to over four hundred thousand illiterate Nicaraguan citizens. Ortega and his government launched this second successful literacy crusade alongside the immediate removal of school registration fees as democratic initiatives to create a "educated and enlightened citizenry" which is in stark opposition to the "oxen" preferred by the Somoza dictatorship. Today Nicaragua is virtually free of illiteracy (latest figures I have seen put it at around 3%).

It is logical therefore for British educators, progressives, socialists and, trade unionists alike to seek to learn lessons from the Nicaraguan education system due to its role in defeating illiteracy and increasing educational outcomes throughout the Nicaraguan population.

We must continue to build support for the people of Nicaragua and opposition to the cruel and illegal sanctions inflicted by the US government by building support for the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group as well as urging our trade unions and individual branches to affiliate and support its work.

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- **Logan Williams is an activist for the NEU and a volunteer organiser for *Arise: A Festival of Left Ideas*.**
 - **You can find out more about Nicaragua from the [Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group](#) on [Facebook](#) and [twitter](#).**