

INTERVIEW

Labour in Nicaragua, 1983

Interview with Companero Francisco Gonzalez, Secretary of International Relations for the *Central Sandinista de Trabajadores* (Sandinista Trade Union Confederation), July 9, 1983 in Managua, Nicaragua Libre

Fred Judson

Q: First, would you care to comment about the general topic of the role and importance of political work at this moment in which the revolutionary process finds itself?

A: In general the CST deals with the problems of workers. Right now we are involved in the enormous work of the Revolution. It is said that we [the CST] are one of the fundamental parts of this process. We have a very active participation in this, and every day more is required of us, a greater dynamic from the labour movement. We have seen two major lines in this task, two fundamental parts, and they are defense and production. That is to say, we have sketched and develop all our union movement work within those lines of action. There is the danger that to operate outside those lines would distract or divert the true purposes of workers at this moment.

Undoubtedly, with the degree of organization we had before 1979, before the triumph, union work was costly and quite difficult. Nonetheless, we learned many things and made some leaps forward. I cannot say now that we have resolved the problems of union organization. We still have some very difficult problems, since, though the CST is the major workers' organization, we are a somewhat atomized body. Unions are organized by firms, not by economic sector. We have 504 of these unions in the CST, in a rather small working-class population. We are working on this problem now, creating federations of these unions, on the one hand, and industrial unions, by sector, on the other.

There are in addition other problems, those of the revolution, which specifically affect workers. For example, historical problems — the cultural and economic backwardness of this country, and the enormous technological and economic dependency on North American imperialism. These two things, in combination with the War of Liberation and the scarcity of organization in the past, sharpen our current difficulties.

We had to deal with positions within the labour movement that are secta-

rian. There are five confederations: the CST, Asociacion de Trabajadores del Campo (Rural Workers Union — ATC), Confederacion General de Trabajadores Independientes (Confederation of Independent Workers — CGTI), Central de Accion y Unidad Sindical (Centre for Union Action and Unity — CAUS), and the Frente Obrero (Workers' Front). There are two others which we consider to be in opposition to the Sandinista government — Central de Trabajadores Nicaraguenses (Nicaragua Workers Central — CTN) and the Central de Unidad Sindical (Union Unity Central — CUS).

Q: I believe one of those last two is affiliated to the AFL-CIO and the other with the Christian Democratic international?

A: Yes. Nonetheless, we are convinced and clear on the point that the reconstruction of our country requires worker unity. So we work for an agreement, at least on a minimum of co-ordination. This has been possible among the first five confederations, but not with the other two.

Q: What sector does the CGTI represent?

A: Construction workers, mostly.

Q: CAUS is affiliated with the Communist Party, I take it, and the Frente Obrero?

A: It has some international ties, but essentially derives from the Movement for Popular Action (MAP), which is of Maoist tendency.

Q: In which sector do they organize workers?

A: They have no unions.

Q: A phantom union?

A: Yes. So within this problem situation, we have created some co-ordination. But CTN and CUS proceed separately. Notwithstanding, we have had talks with CUS and are planning a joint trip of our representatives to Western Europe, specifically to Italy, where there is an Italian Federation for Trade-Union Unity.

In the CST we see our work as the improvement of production and the integration of workers into the tasks of national defense. We have succeeded in having a significant number of workers join the reserve battalions. Some 60 CST labour leaders have fallen in combat defending national sovereignty. We are continuing this work of encouraging workers to join the reserves, to back up those in the mountains. This is a difficult job; it represents the highest level a trade-unionist can reach, to join the reserves and even give up life in the defense of the country.

On the other hand, we reinforce the rearguard — this means raising the level of productivity. But in all this work of defense, we have to find and create an effective combination within the areas of relative normality. We have to create mechanisms of supply for the workers, supply of the basic products for subsistence — basic grains, soap, detergent, cooking oil — everything in the way of basic necessities. So there is quite a job to do, creating popular stores, even right in the factories.

Q: Such stores are created by and for the working class, that is they are not created by the state?

A: The state creates them, indeed, through the CDS [Sandinista Defense Committees — neighbourhood mass organizations], but we are also creating them in the factories. We have created some 242 commissaries in work centres so far. We are concerned that workers get an acceptable basic diet, in the conditions we are now living. There is a system of subsidized meals in workplaces, amounting to about half the cost of daily food needs. If, for example, the meal would normally cost 15 cordobas, the firms provide it for 7.50.

Even in the midst of difficulties, we have achieved, up to now, some 477 collective agreements.

Q: Regarding salary, work schedules, work conditions. . . ?

A: Above all regarding work and working conditions: job security, especially when a worker wants to study, medical assistance, hygiene, medical care at the workplace, and yes, salary, too. We have gained 111 installations of medical facilities in workplaces. We have thus arranged for doctors to be at these installations for certain hours of the day or the week. None of that was possible before 1979. We have also gained, in the four years, some 2221 inspections of working conditions — safety, hygiene — in co-ordination with the Ministry of Labour.

Well, the area of defense is a difficult one, though I can say we are advancing. Besides the reserve infantry battalions, we have formed militia units in factories. These Sandinista Popular Militias are responsible for defense in a time of war, or against sabotage at the workplace. They train and receive instructions regarding their responsibilities in case of a direct attack by the enemy. Our results are quite positive — 10 per cent of our membership has joined the militias.

There is another area in which we work, and that is in revolutionary vigilance. That task is not carried out by the militia, though the individuals may be militia members. These are workers who are guarding the workplace when it is closed or when others are working, to prevent possible attack or sabotage. We have something like 20,000 *vigilantes revolucionarios* in the CST.

Q: That's quite a high figure.

A: It is. We have 106,000 workers in the CST.

Q: Because I thought that the working class, as classically defined, is not very large in Nicaragua.

A: That's right. We have in the CST only industrial and service workers — in commerce, transport, and in some agricultural sectors, for example, sugar and banana workers.

In the January-June period of this year, the CST Council, our highest body, has met to discuss the work of the July-December period. We have planned to concentrate more on defense — a greater integration of workers into the reserve battalions, a review of wages, especially the minimum wage. And we consider not only workers' wages, but those of technicians, too. On 9 July we shall present our proposals on minimum wages to the Ministry of Labour.

We have also concentrated our planning on the struggle for workers' hous-

ing. We have gotten the government to commit 60 million cordobas to housing for the July-December period; this means 3000 units. We have also had designated another 4000 lots on which units will subsequently be built. This certainly shows that we operate beyond the strict limit of union matters. We are concerned with everything that affects workers.

Q: We touched on the topic of the minimum wage. What are the figures?

A: Well, for the industrial worker right now it is 1325 Cordobas per month [At the 28.1 rate, that is around \$48 U.S., but that does not do justice to real purchasing power]. For service workers, it is 1020 C.; for agricultural workers, it is 926 C; for other sectors, like guards or bank employees, it is 1120. Nevertheless, nobody makes these wages; they have all been raised in collective agreements. We are now preparing a new statement on minimum wages in these sectors. It will prescribe substantial increases, though the collective agreements have already raised the old minimums.

Q: I wanted to pursue a little more the topic of renewing the infantry reserve battalions. In your experience, what is the work of recruiting, persuading, convincing an individual or a group of workers that it is their duty, that of their will they might join?

A: As I said, it is one of the most difficult tasks. Nevertheless, we have carried it out for two reasons. First, because we have made defense one of our principal lines of work. So one of the objectives of our educational work is to persuade, to insist on the defense of the country. Because we workers have come to the conclusion that no workers' demand is valid or serves much of a purpose if our defense is not guaranteed. Because if one day the *contras* [counter-revolutionaries] came back to power, all our demands would die. So one of our principles is to defend national sovereignty, our territory and our revolution, in order to guarantee the improvements and advances that we have won. With this line we have been able to penetrate into the worker base. But there is something else here, too: as the reaction pursues its interests, it teaches the working class to defend itself. In practice, their pursuit of power teaches the workers. That is, workers cannot sit with arms crossed in the face of imminent aggression. This aggression shows us that we have to take up a rifle. Everytime a comrade from the union falls, people are more disposed to defend themselves. This does not mean that workers do not wish to live in peace. Indeed, that is what they wish most. But in the face of aggression, there is no other alternative to defense. So the work of political persuasion is rooted in reality itself. Reality has generated a consciousness disposed to defense. The proof is that there are battalions who have already been six months in the mountains.

Q: A journalist from *The Militant* has told me of cases of workers who have returned to workplaces from a period with the battalions. Upon their return, for example in the case of dockworkers in Corinto, they have been more militant, more radical, firmer and more organized than before. In Corinto, they acted to

depose a corrupt union leadership. With battle experience, they became more militant, more conscious.

A: Yes. A worker coming from the front is convinced, and has the strengthened morale necessary to continue the struggle in his union. He does return more radicalized, because he has felt aggression in the flesh, so to speak. He is therefore determined to liquidate the enemy, the counter-revolutionary, in a quicker fashion, to struggle against some deviations that exist in the labour movement. Deviations like the desire for comforts, not caring about defense, about those who are fighting for defense. We have had cases where we have had to hold comrades back, when some things they want to see happen are not possible. Because they are clear, they have felt in their flesh the difficulties on the field of battle. They come back and say, hey, we have to do this, do that. . . .

We have also worked in the legislative area, gaining laws for the protection of fighters, of workers who are mobilized in the battalions. There is another one to protect militia members. Why? Because there are some employers, some people who do not understand the problem of defense. There have been some cases where employers, particularly in the private sector, have dismissed reservists or militia members. So we moved to have legislation to protect the mobilized workers, so that their jobs would be secured. This law has been passed only recently, and we are only beginning to have it applied. It is already being applied in the case of militia members, where because of those duties they have missed some work and the employer has punished or fired them.

We have also worked for reforms to the labour code, and some laws that benefit workers have been passed. There is Decree 179, for example, which creates an unemployment fund. Because the problems we face as a result of the cutting of international loans, of economic pressures, of inherited underdevelopment are problems of chronic unemployment. Decree 1115 is the one protecting workers who take part in revolutionary vigilance; it guarantees them social security. 1224 guarantees the jobs and wages of militia members. 1184 protects promoters and co-ordinators of CEPs (Popular Education Centres).

So our union work along these two lines of defense and production under the pressure of aggression is not limited to the struggle for wages, working conditions, and the right to work. It goes beyond that. It is work that acts for legislation, that works to develop consciousness for defense and production, work discipline, education of the work force in their workplaces. There has been the creation of the CEPs, the participation of workers in the planning and management of production. We have pushed the "innovators" system. So our outlines are very broad in trade-union work and certain aspects have taken on great importance, given the situation we are living in this country. The labour movement in some other Latin American countries at this time, for example, does not even consider the topic of defense. Here, too, the word "strike" has an entirely different connotation. We work so that there will *not* be strikes, though the strike is normally a right and a demand of workers. We believe it has its

historical place in the political and economic liberation of peoples. In our country it has very negative consequences, because we are now trying to produce and save the highest possible quantity of foreign exchange, in order to resolve problems, to buy goods we do not produce here. So the loss of a dollar affects and worsens this problem, which means worsened conditions for workers. So we work to avoid strikes. And the Revolutionary Government has created means and channels to avoid them, and we use the latter. We co-ordinate with the Ministries of Labour, Interior Commerce, Industry, Transport, with other ministries having anything to do with production. We have co-operation with the Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional (Council of the Government of National Reconstruction). We can ask for and receive consultations; we can pose our problems and ideas to them.

Q: I would like to touch upon the subject of workers' education. I imagine there are various forms of education at the workplace and that the content varies, too. Clearly it is based on the fundamentals that everyone needs, that is, literacy. But besides that, there is political education. How does the CST proceed with that?

A: As you said, we begin with formal education. We have, in co-operation with the Ministry of Education, put in place the CEPs. The struggle now is to achieve an average Grade 4 level. But beyond that, we have our own political-union schools. We have put on 40 courses up to now, with 1564 labour leaders attending. What materials are covered in these courses?

First, we teach the history of the labour movement in Nicaragua. This is essential for any labour leader, to know how the problems developed here. We also cover labour legislation. These are courses lasting a month to 45 days. There are courses on the national economy and the history, at least in some of its aspects, of the Sandinista struggle, of Sandinismo itself.

Q: Is there, in these courses, the inclusion of some international aspects, labour movements in other countries?

A: Yes, we have courses on the international labour movement and on the different currents within that movement. In addition, we co-ordinate with SINAFOR (National System of Professional Training) in providing technical courses, particularly for the most outstanding *inovadores* ["innovators"]. You have to understand that these workers are "empirical technicians," that is, they have often not gone to school, and they learn from practice on the job. We give them courses which provide theory for the techniques they are developing.

Q: Well, there is the formal education; there are the labour schools; there are the technical courses for innovators with SINAFOR. Is there a less formal education for workers, in assemblies, discussion groups, etc., in which there is political education regarding the present situation? For example, I presume there is something along these lines to carry forward the work of integrating workers into defense tasks.

A: Certainly. This is what we term the "conjunctural transmission of the situation." Practically, this occurs in every workers' assembly. We speak of the

daily situation the country is living, how things are going, what is the correlation of forces, how the economy is going. Because we know that only informed can workers define a position.

Q: How frequently is there this kind of presentation?

A: In virtually every assembly. In addition, the CST discusses the issues in our newspaper *El Trabajador* [The Worker]. We have the normal assemblies of the union local at the workplace where these things are discussed, as well as "extraordinary" assemblies. This is when there is some urgent or special matter. The normal meetings are monthly. This political education also occurs via the murals.

Q: As I have seen these murals are in every workplace. Who is responsible for the "conjunctural transmission" at the workplace?

A: The secretary of propaganda. The materials come from the CST to these individuals or the local union council, in the form of a circular, which serves as basic material for the union leaders in the assemblies.

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