

NSC Trade Union Delegation to Nicaragua 15 July – 24 July 2009

30th Anniversary of the Revolution Celebrations

Thursday 16 July

The delegation consisted of 9 trade unionists, 7 from Unite, one retired member of the NUT and me, Ruby Cox, from UNISON.

Our first meeting was at 11am with Julian Guevara, the NSC worker in Managua who was our guide and translator for the time we were there. He explained that there had been some last minute changes to the programme, which nevertheless remained impressive, with a wide variety of meetings, not only with a number of trade union leaders, but with civil society organisations, women's co-operatives, NGOs etc.

After lunch, we piled into our air conditioned minibus and set off for our tour of Managua. Having been to Nicaragua once before (on a UNISON delegation) I was keen to see what changes the installation of the Sandinista government had brought about.

The most noticeable things were the enormous posters of Daniel Ortega which were everywhere along the sides of the roads, most of them celebrating 30 years since the Sandinista army was victorious and Somoza was kicked out of the country. They looked somewhat incongruous though adjacent as they often were to advertisements for the latest electronic gadgets and all the other trappings of consumer society. He may have survived the last 30 years, but clearly he still had his work cut out for him. It seemed that the revolution still had some way to go, but then again, the Sandinistas were a minority government, and presumably prevented from introducing all the measures they would wish to see.

We headed first of all to the Tiscapa Sandino Park, which stands on a hill overlooking the city and is dominated by an enormous silhouette of Sandino. Nearby lay the remains of an equestrian statue of Somoza, which had stood outside the National Palace until it was blown up by the Sandinistas. Rather appropriately, now all that remained was his horse's backside. There was also an exhibition of Sandino's life, presumably to coincide with the 30th anniversary celebrations which we were there to take part in. We then went to Revolution Square, a vast empty space bordered on two sides by the old cathedral and the National Palace of Culture, but not before we had been effectively mugged by a gang of very small children attracted by one of the Unite delegates handing out some coloured paper and pencils. After that, there was no shaking them off, as they tried to hand over flowers crafted out of fibrous leaves and told all the women in the party that they too were beautiful flowers. We learnt from this experience and in future handed everything over to responsible adults!

On the 19th of July 1979 we overthrew the Somoza dictatorship. 50,000 martyrs gave their lives for the Liberation of Nicaragua. The triumphant guerrillas of the FSLN entered this square on the 20th of July 1979, made up of men, women, young people and children, who made possible the triumph of the Sandinista revolution. Viva Nicaragua Libre!

Having made our escape from Revolution Square, we went to meet with Jose Angel Bermudez, the Executive Secretary of the FNT (the Nicaraguan TUC) He was

attending the Continental Congress of ALBA Social Movements, so we met him there.

Jose Angel explained to us that the Conference was discussing economic and ecological aspects of ALBA, although there was of course also much talk about Honduras. The ALBA countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Cuba) had sent representatives to discuss an overarching strategy for the left, by means of which they could influence political developments in the region. In spite of earlier reservations about the posters, I found it heartening to see the Nicaraguan leadership's commitment to taking its place amongst the progressive governments in the region.

Jose Angel then gave us some background information. Nicaragua is an underdeveloped country with a population of 5.5m. It has no industry to speak of, and 63% of the economy is in the informal sector. Only 19% of workers have a formal contract of employment, and therefore social security. 65% of the population are under 40. The average time spent by Nicaraguans in school is 5 years. It remains the second poorest country in the region, after Haiti.

For the FSLN, (the Sandinista party headed by Daniel Ortega) their first task on entering government was to eliminate charges for education. Under the liberal government parents had had to pay "voluntary" fees, meaning 800,000 children did not go to school. Now education at all levels and also the health system were absolutely free.

Between July 2008 and 2009 there had been a drive to eliminate illiteracy. 70,000 young people had enrolled as popular educators, following the Cuban model. The drive had been so successful that UNESCO was about to declare the country free of illiteracy (although in practice this meant the illiteracy rate was below 4.7%)

The Literacy Programme used the "Yo Si Puedo" method developed by the Cubans and now used throughout the world. All the materials – videos, TVs, VCRs, books – were provided by Cuba and Venezuela. Jose Angel made a point of saying that this was the true meaning of support and solidarity – the only support they had ever got from the US, he said, was terror and death.

The FNT is made up of 8 TU confederations, which are themselves made up of 920 unions and 180,000 workers. In Nicaragua, unions are workplace based, so what they call a union we would in fact call a branch. The largest confederations are UNE, the public services union, and FETSALUD, the health union.

The 2 main goals of the FNT at present are to achieve social security for the 81% of workers who have none, and a qualified workforce. Challenges include how to sustain momentum after the successes of the literacy campaign, and sustainable improvements in working conditions.

The tax system is also in dire need of reform, something we heard more than once during our visit. At present, the poor pay the most tax, with the rich avoiding payment by means either legal or illegal, but either way with impunity. Jose Angel's

view was simply that the poor produce and the rich are parasites, and he wasn't going to get any argument from us!

The FNT holds its congress every three years, with various decision making bodies and implementation committees. There are 8 trade union leaders who are also MPs, but Jose Angel did not seem to regard this as a conflict of interests, indeed he said it enabled the membership to "keep them where we can see them". Gustavo Porras, a doctor who is the General Secretary of the FNT and also of FETSALUD, is one of them.

The most encouraging piece of information was that the membership of trade unions had grown exponentially since the Sandinistas had returned to power, and it was clear that Jose Angel felt that the unions had turned a corner. They had survived 16 years of neo-liberal government and mounted 400 strikes, one of which, in 1990, had paralysed the country. They had forced the new neo-liberal government to sign a transition agreement respecting the institutional organisation of the police and the army, so that they remained essentially public servants and not instruments of the ruling class. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this, since it ensured the safety of the Sandinistas and the campesinos under the neo-liberal government. And it certainly explained why, when later on we went to the celebrations in the main square, the only police presence we saw were groups of young men sitting in the shade, happily smiling and waving as what seemed like the entire population of Managua streamed past.

Finally, Jose Angel had a few words about the relationship between the unions and the FSLN, which has been criticised for being too close and too compromising. In his opinion, the two had distinct identities, did not always agree, and had to deal with conflicts of interest. He also pointed out that the FSLN is no longer solely a revolutionary party, some of its members are bankers and businessmen and they will be lobbying for their own interests regardless of any radical agenda the leadership may wish to introduce.

He also acknowledged UNISON's support over the years particularly for UNE and FETSALUD, and more recently for the Young Members project, which had resulted in the informal sector workers' union, CTCP, holding its first youth congress and electing a member to the executive committee of the FNT.

Friday 17 July – ALBA Congress and meeting with Civil Co-ordinator

On Friday morning we again attended the ALBA congress, and met with Karina Gomez, the young trade union leader from the Self-employed Workers' Union (CTCP) who had recently visited the UK. She told us with some pride about the youth congress of her union which would unfortunately be held on the Friday after we returned to the UK, and at which a member would be elected to the executive body of the FNT. Over 100 delegates were expected, and this congress, she told us, had sprung directly from the project which UNISON had funded linking young Trade Unionists in the UK and Nicaragua.

Our next meeting was at 3pm at the office of the Civil Co-ordinator, an umbrella organisation made up of smaller Civil Society organisations, individuals, NGOs,

networks, social movements, human rights organisations and co-ops, over 600 in total. Its mission statement says that its aim is to support the development of Nicaragua into a democratic, fair, caring, humane, developed and sustainable society

Inside the ALBA Congress

The two people we met, Luisa and Fidel, started out by saying that since 1990, when the neo-liberal government of Violeta Chamorro got in, organisations such as theirs and the ones they support took on the responsibility of keeping alive the gains made by the revolution. However, during that time they had to learn to be autonomous from government. They also developed a Human Rights approach

Expanding on this, they said that Nicaragua is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic country, the largest in Central America, with the population comprised of many different races, including indigenous and Afro-Caribbean. In this situation, where many different interests are being represented, the best approach is a Human Rights one.

They imagined that when the Sandinistas got back in they would again be working closely together, however this time the government did not embrace Civil Society organisations, possibly because of their autonomy, but instead set up parallel organisations which were affiliated to the FSLN. This has caused escalating animosity and confrontation between organisations that would claim to have the same or very similar aims e.g. social justice.

As the discussion went on, it became clear that the Civil Co-ordinator regarded their organisation as having been dispossessed by both the government and the Trade Unions, and an alarming degree of hostility had sprung up between what can only be described as the two sides. In Luisa's opinion, the trade unions were not interested in autonomy but only in cosyng up to the government.

As you can imagine, this was more than a little confusing. When we asked a few more questions however, more factors came to light. Apparently some of the animosity towards Civil Society arises from the perception by trade unions amongst others that their organisations are staffed by well paid administrators who make a career out of helping the "poor" in Nicaragua whilst doing very well themselves. Whether there is any truth in this I cannot say; certainly in the UK too there has often been animosity between NGOs with well paid executives administering charity to the deserving poor and trade unions who see the solution as people organising themselves and demanding their rights. And certainly the Civil Coordinator's office was far more plush than anything we had seen so far! They also volunteered the information that they received financial support from abroad, e.g. from Norway and Ireland, and also from foreign embassies, from DFID, and from CODA (Community Development and Action) which is a UK based NGO. This was hardly going to endear them to cash-strapped Trade Unions, or to a government still reeling from the effects of the withdrawal of funding by the European Union and the US.

In the evening we visited some different barrios in Managua to see the preparations for the "Day of Happiness", the big celebration in the Square on Sunday. This was only Friday evening but things were already hotting up!

Saturday 18 July – meetings with UNE and COMPAS

Our first appointment was at 9am with UNE, the Public Sector Workers' Union. Domingo Perez, the General Secretary, described the effects of the election of the liberal government in 1990 after 10 years of revolutionary government. He said that during that time the unions had learned how to organise themselves and defend their rights, land reforms had ensured that people had land and houses and there had been quality health and education services free to everyone. All these achievements were swept away. The welfare state was eliminated, and a "facilitating government" substituted for a "paternal government", in other words there was no longer any help for those in need, and everything was left to the market, the result of which was that only those with work, income and resources could participate in society.

Private education meant that "school autonomy" took over, whereby the state paid a small salary and paid for the maintenance of buildings, but everything else was paid by means of "voluntary" fees, including taking exams.

Private health care meant that patients were given prescriptions but could not afford to buy the medicines. If the family could not find the money to pay, the patient might well die.

The privatisation of state industries meant the end of collective bargaining and union rights. The quality of services, particularly electricity, rapidly fell as there were no longer any state subsidies, and the liberals did not want to waste their money investing in an industry where the poor could not afford to pay market rates. Power cuts and blackouts frequently lasted for 12 – 16 hours a day.

Domingo described how neo-liberal policies embedded in the law were still holding the country back. For instance, procurement law, which establishes rules for procuring resources, still forces the government to pay inflated prices for medicines, when local generic medicines would be far cheaper.

UNE itself is 31 years old, formed on 26 March 1978. Domingo joined in 1980 as a bank worker at the National Development Bank, which gave credit to e.g. small scale farmers. He joined the national office of UNE in 1984, and is now a qualified lawyer and accountant.

UNE represents the interests of workers in central and local government and the utilities in both public and private hands (but not health or education). Out of 153 municipalities, there are branches of UNE in 95 (they are referred to in Nicaragua as separate unions) and has 25,000 members. Out of 2 million economically active Nicaraguans, 250,000 are trade union members.

Domingo went on to emphasise the importance of maintaining the revolutionary process. He spoke of UNE's success in bringing in the new Public Employment law, which addresses the problem of local government employees being dismissed whenever a new administration is voted in. Now, he said, it was important to get Trade Union leaders to use this law to protect their members. The practice had created a huge negative impact in the past on both the workers and on the quality of the services they provided, and it was essential that training was provided to equip

union leaders to take up the challenge. In spite of the law, it was still the case that 300 workers had been sacked following the most recent municipal elections.

Domingo said it was important to note that the Sandinista party had only secured 38% of the vote, therefore they had no capacity to unilaterally change anything. In his opinion, the government had the will to do far more to improve things for ordinary Nicaraguans but their hands were tied. They were faced with on one hand failing to implement reforms, for which they were criticised, and on the other, with cutting deals with the liberals, for which they were also criticised. UNE opposes the neo-liberal system, said Domingo, but not the government. However, he was also keen to make it clear that the Trade Union struggle is, in his view, and independent one. Our primary commitment, he said, is to support our affiliates. This is a transitional government, but the Trade Unions are a permanent institution and an established part of global society.

He went on to give his take on the relationship between the Trade Unions and Civil Society. In 1999, he stated, it was the Civil Co-ordinator who chose to exclude the Trade Unions from their definition of Civil Society. Now, he said, a Social Co-ordinator network was being created instead (the parallel organisations, affiliated to the FSLN, which Luisa at the Civil Co-ordinator's office referred to) and this was made up of social movements, trade unions, campesinos, the unemployed and some women's organisations. The individual components of the new network were known as Comites de Poder Ciudadano (CPCs)

Domingo (left) and Julian, our translator, in the UNE offices beneath pictures of Carlos Fonseca and Augusto Sandino

In October 1998, he went on, the country was struck by the dual disasters of El Nino and Hurricane Mitch. Money poured into the country, but this was via the Civil Co-ordinator, and did not go directly to those in need. This struck Domingo as completely inappropriate in that it only strengthened their already overprivileged hand. Development work, he said, must come from the government, and not from Civil Society.

Our meeting with Domingo drew to a close and we had lunch with Susana Morales from the Literacy Campaign and Karina Gomez from the Informal Sector Workers' Union, both of whom had recently been on speaker tours of the UK.

At 3pm we were due to visit Compas de Nicaragua, a small NGO working with women from the poorest barrios on the shore of Lake Managua.

As it says on their website (www.compas1.org), Compas' project focus is "Women in Action," a group of 40 women who are organizing health and education projects in the settlement of La Primavera (Springtime), a poor, urban neighborhood of Managua. WIA are poor women, who live in one-room, tin houses and work as street vendors in order to provide for their families.

Since WIA formed five years ago, the women have developed a gourd art cooperative, a backyard garden and animal husbandry project, a soy food program, a child sponsorship project, and a community store. What they have achieved is certainly impressive, but they have the advantage of a Field Supervisor, Michael

Boudreau, who provides them with the contacts they need to not only sell their produce but to tour as a dance company and to attract visitors from Europe and the US who promote their projects and publicise them on returning home.

Fun and games with the women at Women in Action

It would be so easy to regard this as an example of interference from outside creating a culture of dependency, but the impression we got was of a group of women who were discovering the means to self-sufficiency (not to mention self-respect) and who were grasping it with both hands.

When, later on in the programme, we met other equally motivated groups who were having to do without these contacts and had no access to outside markets, the difference it made to them was only too clear to see.

At 6:30 we dragged ourselves away from Compas, peeling small children off our arms as we did so, and headed off to the barrio, where further pre-celebration celebrations were due to take place. These consisted largely of dance routines performed by more small children, some more impromptu than others, but all of them very entertaining. We knew we had a big day tomorrow so we didn't stay too long, and when we got back to the hotel we discovered Domingo had delivered us a batch of FNT T-shirts (black on red, the Sandinista colours) just to make sure we knew who we would be supporting!

Sunday 19 July – Dia de Alegria

So, this was it! It was a blisteringly hot day before we even left the hotel at around 11, and the streets seemed deserted as we straggled up the road behind Julian, wondering how much water we would need, whether factor 50 was sufficient for the task in hand and whether we had taken enough Immodium. When we hit the main road, however, all this changed. The streets were packed with coaches, buses and pick-up trucks (the preferred method of transport in Nicaragua) all heaving with people waving flags, punching the air in revolutionary salutes and sounding their horns. I can honestly say I had never seen anything like it. The sense of joy in the atmosphere was tangible, and I could see it wasn't called the Day of Happiness for nothing. Everyone was headed towards the square and we followed suit, adorning ourselves with the wristbands, scarves etc that were on sale every few yards as we went along.

By the time we arrived the speeches were in full swing. The square, which had been so empty just three days ago, had been transformed and a massive stage filled one side of it, from which representatives of governments all over Latin America congratulated Nicaragua on its achievements and celebrated the return to power of the Sandinistas. Speakers included Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro, the Honduran Foreign Minister Patricia Rodas, and the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu. They could not have had a more appreciative audience. We estimated that around 200,000 people must have turned up for the party.

We weren't quite sure what to expect, but just soaking up the atmosphere seemed perfectly adequate for a considerable length of time. Eventually, however, it began to dawn that we were being slowly baked to a crisp and that breakfast had been a very long time ago indeed, the combined effects of which caused the less robust members of the delegation to sit down rather rapidly before they fell down. (The Nicaraguans, who were of course better prepared, had brought umbrellas to keep off the sun)

No it wasn't raining!

At this point Julian had the unenviable task of trying to herd us all together before moving off. Unfortunately he had left it a bit too long and people had disappeared in all directions. Some had wandered off to buy beer or water, some to get a better vantage point, some to find some shade and some had simply disappeared. There ensued some lengthy deliberations over whether or not the disappeared contingent had simply gone back to the hotel, and eventually those of us who were concerned about their welfare had to admit that this was the most likely scenario. We therefore straggled off again, reluctant to leave the proceedings, but increasingly aware that the Nicaraguans were made of sterner stuff than we were!

On the way back we passed several individuals who had clearly been celebrating too enthusiastically with local moonshine. They must have passed out in the street, but instead of lying down comfortably on, for example, a patch of grass, they appeared to have simply keeled over as they were walking along. They certainly made some interesting shapes, in the manner of the victims of Vesuvius at Pompeii, who also did not have time to compose themselves. One of them was also about to be very unhappy when, on waking up, he discovered that someone had stolen his shoes.

When we got back to the hotel, our comrades were of course sleeping soundly in their rooms.

Monday 20th July – La Concha, San Juan de la Concepcion, San Ignacio

This morning we were travelling outside Managua to visit La Concha, to see the work of the Nicaragua Community Movement and to meet with the local facilitator, Pablo Lopez. We were scheduled to visit three co-operatives, at La Concha, San Juan de la Concepcion and San Ignacio.

The Nicaraguan Community Movement (MCN) recently won an award from the UN population fund, due to its work since 1978 to better the quality of life in the country through “communitarian social development, gender equality, and protection of the environment”. It has a presence in 120 municipalities and 2,000 communities in the country enabling it to mobilise 20,000 volunteers (of which Pablo is one) to provide health and education services.

The UNFPA also recognised MCN's recent work with youth in the promotion of gender equality, the eradication of violence, the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, and the reduction in the number of adolescent pregnancies.

However none of this brought them any funding, which was apparent as we seated ourselves on the modest patio provided the women's co-operative at La Concha and waited for Pablo to speak to us.

Pablo explained that the Movement had started 31 years ago and that most of the membership were women wanting to improve living conditions for themselves and for their families. Structures at local level varied but all they all shared these goals.

They paid a small fee to join the co-operative, but this was necessary to give the co-operative a legal identity.

Many members were single parents living in poverty. This was not unusual; unfortunately it appears to be the cultural norm that women start to have children as soon as they leave school (and sometimes before). Girls just out of their teens often have two or three children and a stable family background is the exception, not the norm. Children are regarded as the responsibility of women and formal education does little to address this. The vast majority of young women are trapped in a cycle of poverty, exploitation and childbearing before they have even thought what they want to do with their lives.

Against this background, the MCN provides an opportunity for women to organise and to take action in areas such as health, education and housing. They organise community activities such as health brigades, training on human rights, including women's and children's rights, and protests on issues such as water privatisation which threaten the poorest members of the community. They also decide as communities on priorities for community development and seek funding from national NGO's to improve life for the community and especially for those in most need. They have run projects such as latrine building, water projects, housing improvement, agricultural projects, vaccination brigades, and many others.

Pablo went on to say that they see themselves as a revolutionary organisation, but feel that they are opposed by government and by political parties who see their non-aligned status as a threat. However, the organisation remains both strong and effective, as the recent award shows.

Pablo explaining the work of the Nicaraguan Community Movement

Both La Concha and San Juan de la Concepcion were run primarily as small businesses by women agricultural workers. The unemployment rate is extremely high, so the aims were not only to produce food for their own consumption, but to provide employment and funding for the co-op. There are also many other small communities wishing to join the movement, but resources are extremely limited and work is only done on a voluntary basis, in fact I later learnt that although Pablo works full time co-ordinating and supporting the work of the co-ops, he receives no pay and has had to support himself by selling his own land, a source of revenue which is now almost gone.

Unemployment is recognised as the source of many other social problems, e.g. drink and drugs, domestic violence, overcrowding and crime.

The education of boys in particular is regarded as strategic in bringing about social change. We were all moved by the story of one old man (standing behind Pablo in the photo above), a reformed alcoholic who gave up drinking 20 years ago when he realised that it was his responsibility to set a good example to his son, who was

already following the same path. By talking honestly to his son, he had managed to turn both their lives around.

Pablo also talked about the impact of the literacy campaign, and the great desire it had engendered in many people to carry on with their formal education.

One source of funding that has remained constant for the last 20 years is a local twinning arrangement set up between La Concha and a small group (5 – 8) of Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign members in Leeds. Although they only give a small monthly amount, this money had made a huge difference and enabled the co-op to (for example) provide 11 pre-schools as well as furniture for a further six. This was the first example we came across (we saw others later) of how the Nicaraguans can do so much with so little, and how through their dedication and hard work they can use what seems to us a modest sum to benefit a whole community and make real progress towards self-sufficiency.

After visiting La Concha, we met with the local mayor, who reiterated the need for outside help. He explained that, apart from administration costs, his budget was spent mainly on roads and infrastructure. He said it was hard to get people to pay local taxes e.g. business rates and expressed surprise that there were similar problems in the UK! He added that they did not have the resources to take legal action, nevertheless when there came a time when individuals need official paperwork for whatever reason, they had to pay up, which was a less costly way of addressing the problem.

En route to the other co-ops we were due to visit, we went to La Mariposa, a Spanish school and eco-hotel run by an Englishwoman, Paulette Goudge. It had been started in 1987, when she sold her house in Sheffield and came to Nicaragua. From the beginning her aim had been to create both sustainable employment and development projects, and she currently employed 30 people. The hotel had eight rooms, and used solar power as well as locally sourced in season food, much of it from her own organic finca.

She too had worked on local community projects, including the literacy project, working together with the Ministry of Education. Through her business, she had provided funding for a full time teacher working on conservation issues in the local secondary school, and a reforestation project working together with La Concha town hall (and presumably the mayor we had just met). And as if this wasn't enough, she also provided a home for locally rescued animals.

The charges for staying at the hotel to study Spanish nevertheless seemed quite modest, 300 dollars a week all in. Out of this she paid a wage bill of \$1000 a week, needing a minimum of four guests to break even. www.spanishschoolnica.com

We then made our way to the second co-op, at San Juan de la Concepcion. This was larger, having 75 members, the majority of them women, and producing oranges, bananas, handicrafts, honey, rice, pork, chicken and also shoes.

Their biggest social problem is housing, made worse by the fact that the nearby volcano emits fumes that destroy the tin rooves that are traditionally used. The fumes also adversely affect some crops and cause health problems especially with teeth.

Their biggest problem, they said, was access to credit. They were trying hard to create local employment but were unable to expand their operation for lack of resources. They needed a small retail store which would attract tourists (the co-op was situated near a road frequented by tourists) instead of the makeshift stall they had at present, and it was no great feat of the imagination to see the difference this could make to them.

The Co-op at San Juan de la Concepcion

On the topic of funding, we were told that the Comites de Poder Ciudadano – the FSLN grassroots organisations set up by the Sandinistas alongside the civil society community organisations affiliated to the Civil Co-ordinator – would only make money available for projects approved by the government or to those closely associated with the Sandinista party. The co-operatives were not eligible because they were inclusive of everyone, regardless of politics, race etc, as long as they were Nicaraguan. The government itself also provided loans at low interest rates, but even these could not be accessed because collateral is needed and the co-operatives don't have any.

Apart from wanting a proper shop, they were desperate to expand by going to other markets and to improve things like packaging. Without packaging, they realised they could only sell at the most basic price, often to those who would then package or process their produce and sell it on with a far greater profit margin. It was very difficult for them to be aware of all this, yet unable to do anything about it.

Once again the co-op members expressed their thanks to the city of Leeds, which had provided them with a small amount of financial support. Given their desire for self-sufficiency, this financial support had taken the form of a revolving credit fund. Affordable credit is hard to come by in Nicaragua, especially for women, but they had received training from a Nicaraguan NGO on how to set up and run a fund.

Each woman borrowed a certain amount based on the type of small business she intended to run, and then paid it back at a low interest rate. The money could then be used to support more women to start to bring a small and much needed income into the family. 20 women borrowed this way for projects including:-

- hammock making
- making tortillas and drinks
- making fried plantain snacks
- selling clothes, shoes and jewellery
- selling fruit and vegetables
- a small shop, run from a front room
- making laundry baskets
- producing honey
- making handicrafts
- furniture making

Unbelievably, all this had been achieved with an initial sum of £1000, which was in the process of being repaid so that it could be used again to help others.

Our last visit was to the co-operative at San Ignacio. They seemed to have developed their ideas further than the other two co-ops we saw, due to initial funding from the Institute for Rural Development, but nevertheless had run into the same brick wall, lack of resources to take their ideas any further.

The business idea at San Ignacio was to produce pineapple jam and to develop wines made from pineapple and pithaya, pithaya being a bright pink cactus fruit which grows only in Central America and is particularly suited to conditions in the La Concha and San Ignacio regions. They have been doing this for four years, in an attempt to add value to local produce (which is what they had been struggling to do at San Juan). The co-op is a small one, just 16 members.

Now however they had problems with the health and safety regulations covering food processing and production, and the associated legal responsibilities, e.g. brand name and trademark. They needed training and equipment to fulfil health regulations, and wanted to expand their cultivation areas but needed more credit. Also lacking were proper storage and production facilities. At present all they had was one rented wooden building in very poor condition, but they could not invest in it as they did not own it. All these difficulties meant that at present they could not sell through supermarkets, although they did sell their products to the Mariposa Spanish School. They were currently developing a formal proposal for acquiring more suitable premises.

They had had some support from the government, but again it was not enough. Most of the economy is supported by small producers, they said, but the banks only lend to the rich. In order to benefit the whole community, they needed to look outside for funding. Again, Leeds had done what it could to help, but even though the Nicaraguans are experts at making a little go a very long way, it was clear that the funding from Leeds could not be made to stretch far enough to give meaningful support to three separate co-operatives.

The challenge, they said is to develop a different vision of the future for the community, one of enterprise where the community has its own resources and is no longer reliant on help. The charity approach must change, therefore projects such as theirs were important because they offered a way out.

Tuesday 21 July – Santa Rosa School – ANDEN - CTCP

Our destination today was a school, Escuela Barrio Santa Rosa, which benefited from a computer lab funded by a small UK based NGO. Two British volunteers were currently working there teaching IT.

The Santa Rosa Fund was first set up in 1988 as a twinning link between Southway School (now closed) in Plymouth, UK, and the Ernesto Ché Guevara School in the Barrio Santa Rosa of Managua, Nicaragua. It has since broadened its interest and aid and now supports a range of educational initiatives and projects around the country. In 1997 the school became Escuela Barrio Santa Rosa (the name of the neighbourhood) www.santarosafund.org

The school has 803 pupils, pre-school, primary, and secondary.

The IT project began 2 years ago, at which point pupils had to go to a cyber café to use computers. Now they have computers for the school in their own lab.

The Santa Rosa fund has also provided funding for shelves, computer equipment and a maintenance fund. Materials are sent every two months, as well as money for training. A close relationship has been built up over the years and its development is still continuing.

The school has 29 teachers and the government pays their salaries and provides free education. A new policy of inclusion of special needs children in mainstream schools has recently been introduced, and is generally regarded as a progressive move, in fact government policy on education in general is positive. However, in spite of the support of the Ministry of Education for the new inclusion policy, no extra funds have been made available to pay for it.

We were told that many more children have enrolled since education became free, and although this is of course to be welcomed, it has also created problems. Food is provided for the children under a new government programme but funds are also needed for a kitchen, a dining room and furniture. At present food is prepared by parents in their homes and brought to the school to be eaten in classrooms.

It is still difficult for children to go on to higher education as they still have to pay for exams to enrol, and in poorer families their income is needed so they have to work.

In 2006 there were something over 600 children enrolled at the school, now there are 800, but only 2 extra posts have been funded. This leads to 55 children in a class, and some teachers performing dual roles as social workers, with some voluntary help from parents. But in spite of these conditions, our visit was an inspiring one due to the dedication of the teachers and the pride they took in their work and their school. What was also evident was the close relationship between the school and the community, and their success in working together for the benefit of all.

We then went on to visit ANDEN, the teachers' union, and to hear from the General Secretary Jose Antonio Zepeda Lopez on the situation of teachers and formal education in the new context. Jose Antonio is also an MP and Deputy Co-Ordinator of the FNT.

In 1996, he travelled to London and Blackpool for the Labour Party Congress, and also visited the offices of NSC and the NUT.

Throughout the 1980's, he said, there had been good relations between ANDEN and the NUT, but these diminished after 1990. Jose Antonio was told that the NUT's priority was now Africa and Asia, something that clearly still rankled with him. We needed more support when the neo-libs were in government, he said, not less.

However, he was now keen to re-establish relations with the NUT. The youth project recently funded by UNISON had kick started the process of recruiting young members and this year a more intensive training programme was under way. Training is needed to increase awareness of the legal framework for teachers' employment (i.e.

collective bargaining) he said. The workforce is also ageing, new teachers are needed. Youth representation is also needed on the executive body of ANDEN, but Jose Antonio said there is some resistance to this from what he termed the “old guard”.

Sports facilities had also been increased, and Jose Antonio suggested that maybe there could be sports exchanges with the UK.

American and Canadian TU relationships with Nicaragua had started to recover since 2006, although Canada, to their credit, had kept up the same level of communication since the 1980s, and have given ANDEN support in e.g. developing policies on gender issues.

Regarding union density, ANDEN has 42,000 members out of 240,000 teachers. The average salary is \$190 monthly, whereas the basket of basic goods is valued as \$300. This leads many teachers to have part time jobs to supplement their income and this in turn affects the quality of education. The government was now trying to address this with housing programmes specifically for teachers, health programmes and subsidised foods.

Another change brought in by the government was the inclusion of teachers in designing new education programmes. The last Fridays of the month had now become workshops where evaluation, training and planning took place, as well as exchanges on current issues and how to deal with them.

We then moved on to sex education where the picture was not quite so rosy. It was clear that explicit sex education was not allowed and what there was was couched in terms of family relationships without reference to any of the associated issues or problems that might arise. We were told that a textbook with a somewhat more frank approach had been proposed which even had the support of the UN, however the Church objected and the Minister who had proposed its introduction had to resign.

However, we were told that the Ministry of Health was currently conducting a campaign to prevent HIV and other STDS. (How they were going to achieve this given the Catholic church’s opposition to condoms remained a mystery)

From there it was only a short hop to discussing the abortion ban, and what we heard surprised us all. Jose Antonio insisted that there had effectively been no change in the law, and women were still entitled to a therapeutic abortion where three doctors agreed that her life was threatened, it was simply that it was no longer referred to in quite the same way. Indeed, he went on, a woman who worked in the ANDEN offices had suffered complications in the eighth month of her pregnancy and the baby had been delivered early as a result. This was hardly what any of us would have called a therapeutic abortion, nevertheless in view of what he had said first off I for one wanted to check my facts before engaging any further in discussing what was clearly a very sore point.

We therefore returned to discussing the situation for teachers. Jose Antonio identified a number of other concerns:

- problems with buildings, poor construction and overcrowding
- lack of teachers, due to neglect during the years of the neo-lib government. Problem about to increase as a large number of teachers retire. During the neo-lib years, no additional teacher posts were created, so there were many unemployed teachers.
- Until 3 years ago the salary was so low that no-one wanted to become a teacher. Although this is now changing, there are no resources to support the development of teachers.

The average number of years of service is 20. Retirement age is 55 where there has been 15 years service (for women) and 30 years (for men), otherwise it is 60. Pension is 85% of final salary (until 2007 it was 60%)

2 consultation processes are currently taking place with respect to the new curriculum. 3000 teachers have participated in formulating proposals for educational reforms and these are still being discussed with the Ministry of Education.

Jose Antonio then went on to say that a system of polytechnics was what was needed, not just universities. It was very important to invest in technical education. Skills must be developed that aided the technical development of the country. For instance, Nicaragua produces the best coffee in the world, but has no coffee industry. Coffee products are made from Nicaraguan coffee in Costa Rica. The same with kidney beans, the harvest is bought by El Salvador, where they are packaged in plastic bags then sold in Nicaragua. An industry has grown up around Mexican tortillas, fajitas etc, and there is a Nicaraguan product that is better, the quesadilla, but that industry has never been developed.

Finally, Jose Antonio made a positive reference to the new CPCs as a sign of the government's democratic approach. He said it was possible for parents to participate in decision making processes, with 7 out of 10 parents participating in this type of activity, getting together with teachers and the government to find solutions to everyday problems.

We then went on to visit the CTCP, the National Federation of Informal Sector Workers and the CTCP Mutual Fund.

We met with Adrian Martinez the General Secretary. Adrian explained that they were trying to create a new business model, one that did not depend on the exploitation of workers but respected their rights and benefited the community instead of making it more impoverished. He said that self-employed workers had to organise and innovate in order to survive in an ethical and dignified manner in the current highly competitive climate.

The aim of the organisation was the institutional recognition of informal workers and the informal economy, which is always marginalized in capitalist markets.

The union is now recognised by the FNT, and is working within it to organise a strategy for formalisation. The benefits of this are seen as:

- Generation of employment

- Contribution to society
- Promotion of economic democracy
- Fair trade
- Social dialogue
- The end of “invisibility”, which leads to the endless circle of endemic poverty, causing generation after generation to be oppressed, humiliated and persecuted by capitalism.

Adrian then repeated the theme, which we had now heard several times, that they did not want charity, or a culture of dependence. They had the right to be treated as equal participants in society, and were looking to empower themselves to change their own situations.

Right now, he said, we have a big opportunity, in that the global financial crisis has made many people face up to the need for alternative financial systems, involving decent work, social responsibility, and the realisation of human potential. Political power traditionally has belonged to big business, and this must change. He then gave some history of the union;

- Created 17 June 2002
- Jan 2003 institutionalised and legalised
- July 2004 Mutual Fund set up to increased access to health services
- Ongoing work with training and rehabilitation of workers. Many have now finished secondary school, and 5 members are studying medicine in Cuba.

They were now moving onto the second stage of their development, which would involve strengthening the organisation through programmes and projects for technical and professional development, improving working conditions by the introduction of booths to protect workers from the elements, and promoting participation in public politics, especially on social and economic issues. (Adrian and the treasurer, Ernesto Ortiz, are both on the National Council for Social Security).

The CTCP had recently held its first national congress, involving 42,000 members and 94 trade unions making up 7 federations of workers engaged in e.g. working at traffic lights and bus stops, and providing transport and exchange services. The result of the congress was an executive committee of 17 including representatives specifically for women and for young members.

Adrian went on to explain that (as we had heard before) the informal sector was responsible for 60% of the Gross Domestic Product. They provided 60% of exported goods, the main transport networks, 80% of employment, 80% of taxes and 60% of the capital used for trade, production and services, yet the position was still that they had no social security.

The demands of the union therefore included such things as not only recognition but stable, decent employment, access to funding, credit and training, social security, housing projects, and inclusion in the national budget.

Adrian went on to explain in detail some of the union’s international links. They belong to Streetnet International, PSCC (the Central American Trade Union body),

CNEPTI (the national organisation for the eradication of child labour) and ISACC, another trade union body for Central America and the Caribbean. They also have links with trade unions in Norway, Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Brazil, Mexico, Cuba and the UK.

Finally we asked some women members who were present how they had benefited as women from belonging to the CTCP. They described the main benefits as:

- Access to credit
- The Mutual Fund, which gave them access to healthcare
- Not feeling isolated
- Having an identity as a worker and as a union member
- Increased self-esteem
- Training to empower themselves
- Support and recognition for their position as single mothers

Karina and Ruby at the Mutual Fund store

After our visit to the CTCP offices, we went to visit the Mutual Fund which the CTCP had set up. This was based in a shop premises in a market, and we were surprised (and pleased) to again run into Karina, who had just started working there. The shop contained a number of over the counter medicines which were available at reduced prices to members of the scheme. The scheme operates in a similar way to health insurance and other benefits include screening and investigative tests, subsidised prescription medicines and welfare payments following surgery or serious illness.

Wednesday 22 July – Literacy Campaign – CST-JBE – workplace visits

This morning we were due to visit the Association of Popular Education “Carlos Fonseca Amador” and have a guided tour of the literacy museum with Susana Morales. The Literacy Museum was opened in 1980. However, when the Sandinistas lost in 1990, the Ministry of Education banned the literacy campaign and the literacy museum was closed. Books that had been used in the literacy campaign were burned.

However many men and women were inspired to continue with the eradication of illiteracy, and formed the Association of Popular Education “Carlos Fonseca Amador”. The president is Orlando Pineda Flores, regarded as an inspirational figure, and a tireless advocate of the teachings of the educational thinker Paulo Friere. Friere’s work has influenced people working in education, community development, community health and many other fields. He developed an approach to education that links the identification of issues to positive action for change and development. For him, the educational process is not neutral. People can be either passive recipients of knowledge or they can engage in a process whereby they become active participants. As part of this latter approach, it is necessary that people link knowledge to action so that they actively work to change their societies at a local level and beyond.

A typical feature of Friere style education would be that people bring their own knowledge and experience into the process. Training is undertaken in small groups with lively interaction and embrace not only the written word but art, music and other

forms of expression. The Paulo Friere Institute in Spain is currently working in partnership with AEPSCFA as can be seen from their publication <http://www.rizoma-freireano.org/index.php/experience-cooperation>

For his part, Pineda is passionate about teaching and has been the driving force behind Nicaragua's Literacy campaign since its inception. In Pineda's opinion, "to learn to read is also to shake off backwardness and poverty, and to learn to live by something" and he never gave up the struggle, no matter what difficulties were placed in his path.

In 2005 therefore the literacy campaign started up again, whilst the Sandinistas were still in opposition. The Cubans trained the Nicaraguans in the "Yo Si Puedo" method which they had so successfully used themselves, and donated all the necessary resources, including books and audiovisual equipment. The campaign gathered pace again after the Sandinistas came back into power. As it says on the NSC website, "In July 2007 the new government launched a national literacy campaign to be administered through local councils with the aim of eradicating literacy by July 2009. 'Capitalism creates poverty, creates a few rich people and many poor ones, and a fundamental characteristic of poverty is illiteracy. So our government must struggle not only with illiteracy, but with the ills created by poverty, of which illiteracy is just one – it's a social consequence and a cause of poverty' Miguel de Castilla, Minister of Education" (and of course they did succeed in their goal of eliminating illiteracy)

The literacy campaign, as with the literacy crusade of 1980, has involved the mobilisation of thousands of university students to work with community leaders to carry out surveys and to act as literacy facilitators. The method being used – Yo Si Puedo – takes into account the socio-economic reality of the students, who include street sellers, women, indigenous people and low paid workers who missed out on school because they had little time to devote to education. The method is flexible and based on self-teaching. The students are assisted by a facilitator who provides materials, equipment, logistical support, advice and encouragement. Students are provided with a textbook and a workbook in their own language, Spanish, English, Miskitu or Braille. Students and facilitators are then supported by the Ministry of Education or NGOs who provide supervision and training while local councils give logistical support.

The end result of all this dedication is that people are being taught not only how to read and write but also how to respect themselves, how to organise their neighbourhoods and how to transform both it and themselves. It is hardly surprising that the neo-liberals went to such extraordinary lengths to try to stop the campaign.

After this uplifting visit, we managed to squeeze in a brief detour to the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM). At first we had been unable to arrange to meet with them, however I put in a special request, thinking that they were probably going to be more frank with us about the abortion ban than anyone we had so far encountered.

We met with Juanita Jimenez, a lawyer, who is the Executive Officer of the MAM. She made it clear that under Article 163 of the Penal Code, any type of abortion, and any interruption of pregnancy, has now been declared a crime. This has been reaffirmed in the new Penal Code, for which the new government is responsible.

Previously therapeutic abortion was allowed where the life of a woman was in danger. This exception was established in law and required the agreement of three doctors. This had made it possible to interrupt a pregnancy where there was a risk to the life of the woman, and could also be applied in cases of child abuse or rape. In the 80s, when the Sandinistas had previously been in power, there had been a committee in every hospital which could determine whether or not a therapeutic abortion could be allowed. It was therefore possible to keep statistical information on the numbers of therapeutic abortions. The two following (liberal) governments however stopped this.

The MAM had lobbied hard to keep the exception for therapeutic abortion in the new penal code, however, as is now widely known, the present government has maintained the complete abortion ban.

With regard to Jose Antonio Zepeda's position that nothing had really changed, it became clear that what he had been referring to was an administration manual produced by the Ministry of Health, which still referred to the need to have three doctors' agreement before a therapeutic abortion could be performed, but which was now in clear contradiction of the law. In all honesty it did not seem very likely that following instructions in a manual would provide any defence in a court of law, should a doctor be unfortunate enough to be accused of performing an abortion.

Juanita's view was also that the FNT gave the government total support, although she conceded that some members want them to be more autonomous and are unhappy with this position. She also believed that many women trade unionists are dismayed by their organisation's support for this policy, but dare not say so, since for all the good work that they do, most trade unions are still deeply patriarchal in their attitudes.

The challenge brought in the Supreme Court that the abortion ban is unconstitutional continues.

With regard to sex education, she was also rather more critical in what she had to say than Jose Antonio. There was nothing at all about gender issues, sex education per se did not really exist, and although some attempt is made by NGOs and civil society organisations to address this, it is just a drop in the ocean. To make matters worse, the government now has a policy of being aggressive with all NGOs, but especially those providing sex education and information on sexually transmitted diseases. Rosario Murillo (Daniel Ortega's wife) had even gone so far as to issue a warning specifically to those NGOs to cease their activities.

Squeezing in this extra meeting was certainly worthwhile but unfortunately it also made us late for our next appointment, a meeting with the CST –JBE. This was the Union Confederation for Industrial Workers, affiliated to the FNT, and the meeting was to be followed by a visit a plastic bags factory, and a clothing factory in a Free Trade Zone.

The CST-JBE is a confederation of 16 smaller organisations, 120 trade unions and 50,000 members, most of whom work in the private sector. The biggest sectors are in wood, mines, energy, communication, EPZs, bananas and fishing.

Maquilas (factories based in the EPZs) came to the country as a new economic model, and currently employ 80,000 workers. The owners are mainly Taiwanese, Korean or from the US, and provide garments for Walmart, JC Penney and Levis amongst others. Workers earn around \$130 per month, but less in the countryside. There are health and safety issues for the workers – for instance with hearing – and violations of their rights still take place. Although TUs now have a presence in at least some factories, they are not always effective in protecting workers' rights, as we saw at the US maquila that we visited, which produced garments for Dockers and Levis.

Most print businesses are small and family-owned. Most of the workers are young people who have picked up the job by working. Once again there was the same problem with attracting young members, as at present when older workers left or retired, the trade union workplace organisation was weakened. New Health and Safety laws for instance are only one year old, and 50% of employers still violate this law. Without a strong trade union presence, they will undoubtedly continue to do so.

At the maquila, we met Manuel Flores, who had spent 6 years working in the company, 3 of them as a trade union activist and organiser. He said there were many issues at the factory, and some progress had been made, particularly with health and safety issues and protective clothing. He said that this EPZ was a lot better than many others (and it certainly appeared that way otherwise I am sure we would never have got through the door), nevertheless the TUs were always afraid of demanding too much because the work could be lost to other countries with less regard for workers' rights, and many jobs had already left the country because of attempts to organise in the factories. In this context, he saw his role as gaining concessions for the workers by maintaining a positive dialogue with management.

The Nicaraguan journalist William Grigsby seemed to have reached a similar (if slightly more damning) conclusion on the effectiveness of the CST when he said that it "hasn't been capable of defending workers interest with authenticity. In the Free Trade Zones the CST has followed a policy of class conciliation, facilitating the Korean, Taiwanese and US companies to continue implementing a labour regime that is equivalent to semi slavery"

This seems rather harsh given the lack of any realistic alternatives, but surely the only real answer, still some time off in the future, is for global trade unions to address matters on a global scale and find ways to prevent the "race to the bottom" always undermining the efforts of people like Manuel.

I cannot deny that the visits to the two factories (and these were factories that presumably the owners were proud of) for me resembled nothing so much as two separate visions of hell, with a choice toiling like a maniac in unbearable heat and deafening noise (the clothing factory) or being asphyxiated by toxic fumes and chemicals and exposed to all sorts of unguarded machinery in the plastics factory. The only good thing that could be said was that the workers probably had nothing better to compare it with, whereas we would probably have gone mad within a week.

This seems a rather negative note on which to end this report, but on second thoughts, perhaps it is appropriate as a reminder that although as trade unionists we speak the same language of solidarity, workers' rights and decent working conditions the world

over, our Nicaraguan colleagues still face situations that we would not imagine in our worst nightmares. This is something we could perhaps have forgotten, tied up in meetings and seeing only the benefits that the TUs had brought to their members. But just at the right time I was reminded that appalling working conditions anywhere in the world are something that must concern us all, and something we are obliged as trade unionists to address.

Conclusions

Our time in Nicaragua was exhausting, bewildering and thoroughly enjoyable. I will never forget the elation of being in Revolution Square on the Dia de Alegria, or the joy and pride of ordinary Nicaraguans in claiming and owning their revolution. It is this more than anything that leads me to believe that Nicaragua will find its way out of its current difficulties, propelled by the sheer enthusiasm and commitment of its people, and especially the young.

Wherever we went and whoever we met, we saw that Nicaraguans had not forgotten the meaning of the work “community” and even more importantly, they still saw it as something worth striving for. Despite grinding poverty and the vagaries of a leadership that, in spite of its progressive policies still seemed on occasion to be losing its way, this was what kept them going and what kept them determined to provide a better future for their families. And that determination is unshakeable.

We have to stick with the Nicaraguans, through all their troubles and difficulties, because at the end of the day Nicaragua gives us all hope that through persistence, courage and generosity of spirit we can secure that better way of life that we all need to believe is possible. They deserve our support and our gratitude. Well they have mine anyway.

Ruby Cox
UNISON

Suggestions for further action

1. UNE

Domingo Perez, the General Secretary, has requested assistance in the following areas:

The most immediate need is for financial support for the 80 workers who were sacked following the most recent municipal elections, in spite of the newly introduced Law of Public Employment. Subsistence costs are estimated at \$4,000 monthly, plus \$1000 for legal fees so that they can continue with the struggle to be reinstated. This aspect of solidarity work is particularly important as 30 of the workers are from the municipality of Granada, one of the most right wing in Nicaragua. If the law can be successfully applied there, it will set a very valuable precedent for other places too.

Also needed is funding for legal training so that local reps are better able to defend their members, using the new law.

2. COMPAS

There are a variety of ways to support Compas, the small NGO we visited which works with women from the poorest barrios on the shore of Lake Managua.

As it says on their website, (www.compas1.org), they are raising money for bio-gas systems that convert animal manure to cooking gas and grey water systems that eliminate harmful grey water. The bio-gas systems are about \$350 each and the grey water systems are \$30 each. They are also raising money to provide loans to farmers for growing food and to WIA member for their small businesses.

One of the simplest ways to make a difference is through the sponsorship programme, through which over 100 of the most impoverished children in La Primavera are able to study. More than 20 Women in Action members have also been sponsored and are taking adult education classes or learning a trade. Sponsors support a child or WIA member for typically something like £20 monthly. This helps pay for tuition, school supplies, and school uniforms.

3. Fair Trade links

Compas also sell fair trade organic coffee and the women make artwork carved from gourds, and they are looking for outlets where they can be sold. At least one of the co-ops we visited could also supply fair trade produce, but they need help with overcoming problems with licensing, meeting health and safety requirements etc. Anyone who has expertise in this area could provide them with valuable links and information.

4. Nicaraguan Community Movement

The MCN needs help in a variety of ways, so of them general and some of them specific to one co-operative.

Given their overwhelming desire for self-sufficiency, the most pressing need is for funding to set up more “revolving funds” (i.e. credit for small businesses run by the co-op members). These funds are repaid, usually over six months, so that the money is then there to help others in turn. A submission could be made in greater detail (e.g. specifying terms and conditions of loans) if this is required. This could be aimed at a specific project (e.g. helping the women at San Juan set up their roadside shop) or left to the local organisers to decide the areas of greatest need.

A specific request has also been made for help in acquiring the following items:

A motorcycle (for accessing more remote communities)

A computer (at present the co-ordinators have to use internet cafes to do administrative and organising work)

A black/whiteboard for use in training workshops etc.

La Concha

In addition to the above, the women at La Concha were particularly keen on having contact with groups of women in the UK and exchanging information about everyday lives etc.

San Juan

At San Juan they had their hearts set on the creation of a proper shop that would attract the attention of passing tourists. A project proposal for funding could be submitted if needed.

San Ignacio

The co-operative members at San Ignacio desperately need financial help to take their ambitious project of creating wine and jam from local produce to the point where they can reach a much wider market.

5. Literacy Project

Nicaragua's Literacy campaign continues with volunteers heading for the Atlantic Coast, historically the least developed part of the country, to work in the Rio Coco area. They have divided the Rio Coco into 4 sections and have set up (or are setting up) 50 stations in each sector which act as "literacy centres". 12 – 15 people will be taught at each centre, in programmes that run for 3 months.

Since all education materials, equipment and other expenses are being funded by Cuba, Venezuela, the Nicaraguan government and dedicated voluntary workers, the only remaining cost is for fuel to run the generators (which in turn power the TV's and video players) which will enable everything else to fall into place. It should be emphasised that these are remote rural areas, where generators are the only source of power. Without the fuel to run them, it is impossible to use the electrical equipment on which "Yo Si Puedo" depends (and which is in itself a self sufficient method which does not require the presence of trained teachers)

Every literacy centre needs 10 gallons of fuel to complete a literacy programme for 12 or 15 people. This costs \$60. If the centre caters for 12 students on average, that means that the cost of teaching one person to read and write works out at just \$5 dollars per person, or less if the number of students is more.

The centres could be funded individually, at a cost of \$60 dollars per programme, or to fund all 50 centres in one area would work out at \$3000.

Ruby Cox
27/09/09