

Rebel Girls' Rag

A FORUM OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

Vol. 6 No. 1

75¢

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER, 1991

News & Views from Toronto Socialist Feminist Action



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Fair Wages & Working Conditions for Homeworkers

by Shelly Gordon

An immigrant woman sits huddled and miserable over her sewing machine in a dim, damp basement, sewing pieces of pockets together for starvation wages while her children play unattended in the same barely furnished room. A picture from New York at the turn of the century or from downtown Toronto today?

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union has just completed a study of homeworkers in Toronto that shows that conditions for many in the industry are reverting to standards as appalling as existed 70 and 80 years ago. Thirty chinese-speaking homeworkers in the garment industry were interviewed last summer. Two thirds earned less than minimum wage. One woman, who was deaf, earned roughly one dollar per hour.

All but two of the women worked more than 44 hours per week. All but one were working at home because they had to care for small children and could not afford child care on the wages they would make in a garment factory (if there were any garment factory jobs). Most had previously worked in a factory and had started to work in the home after they had a child. Most suffered from repetitive strain injuries but are not eligible for workers' compensation. All would rather be working in a factory than at home. All would require more english and skills training in order to find work in any other occupation.

Ironically, the study started with an inquiry into the changing technology of the industry. As in all industries, the uses and effects of technology are totally interdependent with the structure of the industry and work processes. The structure of the industry has changed dramatically over the past few years. It is now dominated by a few giant retailers, like Dylex in Canada. The retailers have computerized their inventory systems, hooking up each individual cash-register in each of hundreds of retail outlets across the country to a

central inventory control system. This has allowed the garment industry, like most others, to move to a "just-in-time" supply system so that they can reduce the cost of inventory and the risk of stocking the wrong inventory.

Restructuring the garment industry

Traditionally, manufacturers were the ones who worked with designers and made the production decisions. Now the giant retailers hire the designers and contract out the manufacturing to the lowest bidder who can provide the desired quality of merchandise. Much of their product is produced off-shore - Hong Kong, the Philippines, Mexico.

Canadian manufacturers have had to adjust to increased control by retailers and the globalization of supply in three ways. A very few have modernized their equipment in order to realize some increased productivity and flexibility. But the economic advantage of modern equipment is minimal and few manufacturers have had the capital to upgrade their plants. Others become importers themselves in order to stay in the business. Those who wish to continue to manufacture are forced into cost competition against imported goods. The Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. intensified the downward pressure on costs and heightened the crisis in the industry. The labour force in the Canadian garment industry has declined by more than 50% in the last decade.

Competition against cheaper imported goods engenders further structural changes in the industry. The traditional manufacturer becomes the "middle-man". In order to achieve the lowest possible production cost the manufacturer creates a "just-in-time" labour force. Homeworkers are the most "flexible" of all workers. By sub-contracting work to smaller jobbers who, in turn, contract it out to homeworkers, manufacturers (and the retailers at the top of the heap) avoid overhead costs, avoid the non-wage costs of a

permanent full-time labour force (such as unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, pension and health benefits premiums), avoid unionization, and generally avoid responsibility for the wages and working conditions of the people sewing their garments. The ILGWU estimates there are 2,000 homeworker garment workers in Toronto.

One example of precarious employment

While conditions of homework are particularly stark in the garment industry, it is not an isolated situation.



Finn Harvor

It is one example of the growth of "precarious employment", often called "non-standard" employment. More and more workers, especially women, are employed in part-time, temporary and homework jobs which pay less than full-time permanent work, have no benefits and have no job security.

One in four part-time workers in Ontario are known to be "involuntary" part-time workers. They want but cannot find full-time work. Most of the new jobs created in the 1980's in

Toronto were in business and personal service industries, and few of them were full-time permanent positions. Intermittent government hiring freezes for the past two decades have resulted in the mushrooming of temporary jobs and "consultant" contracts in the public sector.

The federal government itself is looking at sending 19,000 clerical jobs into the workers' homes in the next 10 years. Banks and insurance firms are sending out data-entry to homeworkers - in the Caribbean as well as in Canada. Electronic assembly is being done by homeworkers. The pattern is repeated around the world.

Meanwhile, women's and business magazines foster the myth that "working out of your home" is more rewarding, more relaxed and more under a worker's control than work in an outside workplace. Best of all, you can combine child care and house work with your paid work! While

some of these advantages may be true for business consultants or women working in intellectual professions, they certainly are not true for the majority of homeworkers. Most remain entirely dependent on a single employer, receive less than minimum standards for wages and working conditions, have no security, work very long hours and suffer from stress as well as other occupational health problems.

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Solidarity Not Competition --

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We are a socialist-feminist group which operates on the principle that mass action is our most effective instrument of change. We believe that the oppression of women touches every aspect of our lives and that the liberation of women will require fundamental changes in the structure of society.

We hold bi-weekly meetings where our policy and overall direction are determined. Smaller committees work on specific events or issues and in different constituencies.

We welcome new members. For more information, phone 531-2369.

This issue was put together by:

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Negotiations to sign a free trade agreement between Canada, U.S. and Mexico are being met by rising opposition in each of the countries. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) will intensify the economic integration that has been taking place in this continent for the last few decades under a institutional framework that will make it harder on the working class while further securing conditions favouring capitalism. Trade unions and social activists are organizing against the NAFTA and Tory agenda. Just as TSFA argued during the last campaign against free trade (c.f., Rebel Girls' Rag, Vol. 2, No.2, 1988), it is important for socialists oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement and be involved in the fightback.

Capitalism has created a world economy yet its development is uneven. Plant closures and job loss are a feature of capitalism - old plants close down when they are unprofitable, never to open again while other plants close up shop to find cheaper labour in areas such as the 'right to work' areas of Southern U.S. (i.e. no minimum wage laws), the Maquiladoras in Mexico (initiated in the late 1960's), or off-shore areas such as the Philippines.

Nationalist labour leaders such as Canadian Labour Congress head, Shirley Carr would have us believe that the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement was unique in causing the loss of a quarter of a million 'Canadian jobs.' But job losses and relocations have occurred for decades not only in Canada but in the U.S. as well. During the 1982 recession, 55,000 jobs were lost in the Toronto manufacturing sector alone. During the 1970's and early '80s in the U.S., restructuring produced job losses estimated at one million within Mononghela Valley alone. Of 25,000 Pennsylvania steelworkers that lost their jobs in the early 1980's, 50 percent are still unemployed. People of colour and women workers are more likely to become unemployed during restructuring, experience longer periods of unemployment, and tend to receive lower wages in less stable sectors of the labour market when re-employed.

What is the free trade deal about?

The free trade deals are not simply about securing already liberalized trade links between the three countries. Economic integration has been a policy guiding governments during the last number of decades. The free trade agreements represent a political and legal framework to further enshrine the rights of capital and to ensure favourable conditions for capitalist accumulation, mobility of capital and remove barriers on capitals' functioning thereby protecting the gains capital has made during the 1980's and insulating capital against pressures placed on future governments by workers and mass

movements.

The stakes are somewhat different for the three states. While the U.S. remains a dominant economic power within a highly competitive system of world capitalism, it is facing competition and economic challenge from emerging trade blocks forming around Germany (Europe) and Japan (Asia). Thus the bourgeoisie wants to consolidate its zone of influence and increase its capacity to control competition from the trading blocs. As such, the NAFTA is part of a larger strategy, the "Enterprise of the Americas", to consolidate and integrate the whole of North and South Americas in one economic trading block. The Canadian bourgeoisie, by anchoring programs within a continental framework, provides a more concrete terrain for pushing back the social gains made by the Canadian workers' and social movements. Mexican president Salinas' stake in a trade deal with two imperialist countries (albeit Canada a junior partner) rests on the history of imperialism and the current economic crisis. Mexico is staggering under an external debt of \$101.6 billion (1988) and facing increasing control by the International Monetary Fund and Bush's need for a stable and amenable neighbour to the south.

Editorial

The stakes may be different but the underlying interests of capital in all three countries are the same. Economic restructuring and continental integration entrenched through the free trade agreements takes place at workers expense. Gender and race divisions of labour produce conditions which differentially shape how people of colour and women workers experience economic restructuring and attacks on social programs in the current era of free trade and continental integration. For example, see the article, *Homeworking*, on the effects on immigrant women from restructuring in the garment sector. Young women make up the majority of workers in the Mexican Maquiladoras plants because of their supposed 'dexterity and speed' - many of these women are burned out after working a couple years in highly labour intensive and harsh working conditions.

How to fight back

Unfortunately the fight against the last free trade agreement was led by an alliance of Canadian nationalists organized in the Pro-Canada Network, the bourgeois liberal party, NDP, and trade unions. It was founded on a Canadian nationalist perspective and a cross class alliance. The campaign was based on the assumption that the Canadian state and capitalists are more humane than their American counterparts and that social programs are part of the

'Canadian culture.' We know that these social programs are hard won gains made by workers and social movements on the picket lines and mass actions. Free trade is not a simple threat to 'national sovereignty', a bad economic policy that can be corrected by electing another party -- it is an institutional expression of a process of continental integration well under way.

It is of little surprise that such a limited campaign based on cross-class alliances was defeated. Our experience of layoffs, plant closures, wage freezes, privatization, deregulation of industries, regressive taxation such as the GST, cuts in social spending all poignantly underscore that the Canadian state and capital does not work in our interest, any more than the U.S. state and capital does for American workers. Our interests lie with workers and the oppressed in the U.S. and Mexico.

While the nationalist perspective of the Action Canada (previously Pro-Canada Network) still dominates the growing anti-free trade campaign, there are openings to build solidarity among workers in the three countries. NAFTA provides an unprecedented opportunity for trade unions and social activists to work together. Inde-

pendent trade union organizations in Mexico are calling for solidarity in opposing the deal from workers in the U.S. and Canada. As Alfredo Dominguez of the Mexican Authentic Labour Front said at the Solidarity, Not Competition conference (see report last issue of Rebel Girls' Rag):

"When we ask US and Canadian workers for help, we are only asking them to act in their own self interests...Mexican, US and Canadian workers have common interests which we must promote with common action... The key for all of us is to bring up the standard of living in Mexico by supporting free, independent unions and genuine political democracy...good secure jobs will not come from trade agreements among the wealthy, we need free workers not free trade."

Increasingly unionists and social activists from the three countries are getting together to share information, debate and strategize for the best way forward. In October, delegations from Canada and the U.S. went to Zacatecas, Mexico to hold a 'Counter Conference to the Trilateral Talks for a North American Free Trade Agreement'.

While the links are being made between unions and organizations there are also increasing actions which point to the way forward. On January 8th, 1991, Ford workers from the three countries joined together to say 'No Way' - no way to violence against Mexican workers demanding decent

Oppose North American Free Trade

conditions, to layoffs and concessions in the US and Canada, and to a free trade agreement that would hurt workers in all three nations. This action of international solidarity was the first anniversary of an armed assault against Mexican workers inside the Cautitlan plant and the fatal shooting of union activist Cleto Nigno. In response to the announcement that 350 people would lose their jobs at Caterpillar when the company closed its Brampton plant to shift production to the US, nearly 200 people occupied the plant. As discussed in the article, *Remaking the Working Class*, the recent strikes by the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers point to a shifting of the terrain in which more rank and file fightbacks are possible in Canada.

Actions which involve rank and file workers in militant fight-backs in their own work places, and the possibilities of building a network with workers and activists in the U.S. and Mexico point the way forward. It is only by organizing such a strong network that we can build the kind of struggle that has the power to win.

Socialists must be involved in this fightback, doing what we can to build rank and file activity and alliances among every labour, farmers', women's, Aboriginal, anti-racist and immigrant organization in Quebec and English Canada. First, we must oppose protectionist proposals and push for solidarity among workers and the oppressed in the fightback. Second, we must oppose labour leaders such as Leo Gerrard of the United Steelworkers and the NDP who argue that all the NAFTA needs is a social charter. Proponents of the social charter believe that it will ensure that guarantees of minimum labour rights, environmental standards and social programs will all be met in each country. As the European Social Charter has demonstrated, the charter is a political declaration with no legislative or regulative framework. In essence, it can effect little concrete gain. Such a strategy only diverts energy from a broader fightback and demobilizes forces as the social charter is taken up by and transformed in the process of trade negotiation. Finally, to support a social charter inherently supports the free trade negotiations instead of building an important fightback and international solidarity.

We need concrete strategies to mobilize a fightback against the NAFTA and Tory agenda. A network of unionists and social activists could link up actions in all three countries and provide material and political support to assist workers organizing in the Southern US and Mexico (see article *Mujer Obrera*).

We must call for cancellation of the Mexican debt. Every year 8 to 11 billion dollars drains out of the Mexican economy in the form of debt payments. The structural adjustment programs imposed on Mexico by the

International Monetary Fund have a devastating impact on the people of Mexico whose living standards have been almost halved in the last decade.

We must oppose the blatant racism towards Mexican workers underlying the governments' campaign for NAFTA. Bush and Salinas are fanning the flames of racism within the U.S. by arguing that NAFTA will slow the movement of migrant labour and reduce Mexican immigration to the U.S. We must oppose the "Light Up the Border" attack by whites along the US-Mexican border -- residents illuminate the area with their car head-

lights to help the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) catch so called 'illegal aliens.' In the current context with accumulation moving from a national to global basis, the restructuring of capitalism has created the conditions in which the bulk of the worlds' working class in the developing countries will play an increasing role in class struggle. Immigration controls are the state's reactionary attempt to maintain control against powerful new global forces at work. Now more than ever it is time to demand open borders and full labour rights for all immigrant

workers.

Socialists have to be involved in the fight against free trade and the Tory agenda. We have to be there, talking about building a society based on realizing human potential and meeting human needs, not profit; a socialist society which is anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-heterosexist. It is only an alliance among workers, women's, aboriginal, anti-racist and immigrant organizations in Quebec and English Canada that has the capacity to link up with those that share our interests in the US and Mexico that we can win.

Remaking the Working Class

by Carolyn Egan

In the past few months we have witnessed incredible ups and downs in working class struggle. Over 25,000 Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) strikers rallied on Parliament Hill. They demanded that the government resign and shouted their defiance to back to work legislation. It was the largest and most militant labour demonstration we have seen in years. There was support from the National Farmer's Union, truckers blockaded the Ambassador Bridge, and the economy reeled from the effects of the strike. A short time later, under the threat of legislation, those same strikers, though still defiant, were ordered back to work by their leadership. The Canadian Union of Postal Workers went back out; they refused the mediation process unless their picket lines remained up. There were such possibilities: two federal unions striking together, building both support, and pressure for a general strike!

A general strike didn't happen, and it is important to put the events of the past months in perspective. We have to appreciate that we are in a transitional period: a period of political ferment, full of contradictions. We are coming out of a decade which saw a strong employers' offensive and a very real decline in working class struggle. As we moved out of the eighties we saw the beginnings of change: the nurses' strikes, the Caterpillar occupation, and various walk-outs. It is clear that the ground has shifted. There is more confidence and more militancy, but the legacy of the past decade is still with us in very real ways. Rank and file organizations are still very weak and many trade unionists have little strike experience. We will probably see more advances in the coming period, but there will also be retreats.

This is the light in which we must recognize the incredible steps forward that were made during the PSAC strike. PSAC has been trans-

formed from the bottom up. It is no longer the same organization. Women and people of colour took active leadership roles in the locals. As one strike coordinator said at a rally at 4900 Yonge Street, "The sleeping giant has awoke and we will never lay down our heads again. Look out Tories, we now understand what we can do!" Those strikers stood shoulder to shoulder against a massive government assault on union rights that had implications for all workers. The federal government targeted PSAC and CUPW and attempted to scapegoat union members for the economic problems of this country. It wanted to smash those unions and teach all workers a real lesson. And the rank and file wouldn't allow it! They surprised their leadership, the union movement, and even themselves. The Tories were shocked by the massive show of support on Parliament Hill and could no longer pretend that the strike was not effective.

Politics is the exercise of power. To

very real understanding that these strikers were fighting not only for themselves but for all those who oppose the Tory agenda. That is why truckers, farmers, women's organizations and anti-racist groups and many others supported the strike. PSAC captured the anti-Tory sentiment that is so strong. They generalized what was happening in their own workplaces to what has been happening in the country as a whole. The entire Tory agenda came under attack!

Even though they went back to work without winning increased contract demands, a significant politicization took place during the strike. Hopefully it will be the beginning of an increased understanding of the strength of the working class and its central role in political change. This strike has radically affected the political terrain of this country. It has trained thousands of labour activists, influenced working class consciousness, and given us a hint of what may



win demands, the balance of power has to shift in the workers' favour. During the strike, thousands of workers took their future into their own hands. The very fact that a union with the history of PSAC has taken these militant actions is a tremendous advance in the present period. The Tory attempts to discredit the strikers and win public support fell flat. Their arguments didn't hold. There was a

be to come in the nineties. In order for these advances to be consolidated, a network of rank and file militants must be built that will actively take on the employers' agenda of wage freezes, lay offs and plant closures, and will put forward a strategy of militant work place fightbacks that consciously oppose the racism and sexism that so often stands in the way of a working class unity.

Mujer Obrera: Women Workers Organizing



An Interview with Cecilia Rodriguez of Mujer Obrera

by Mercedes Lopez

[Reprinted with permission from *Correspondencia*, published by *Mujer a Mujer/Woman to Woman*, a collective of Mexican, U.S., Canadian and Caribbean women based in Mexico promoting communication, exchange and strategic connecting among activist women throughout our region.]

One hundred and forty-three years have not managed to divide the struggles and hopes of Chicana and Mexican workers living along the Mexican U.S. border. This is evident in the work of the organization *Mujer Obrera* (Woman Worker), an organization of immigrant women working in the factories and sweatshops in the border city of El Paso, Texas.

Cecilia Rodriguez, a third generation chicana, is the director of *Mujer Obrera*, which began in 1982 as an information and orientation center for low-income women, and has grown into a membership organization involving over 750 women from different workplaces. As Cecilia explains, "The work of *Mujer Obrera* changed focus because women wanted more than education about workplace rights; they wanted to develop themselves as women and as workers, they wanted an organization with their own leadership."

She continues, "*Mujer Obrera* works in several areas: workplace rights, health, education, housing, food, peace and political freedom. These form the axis around which we

have centered our struggle; we demand economic, social and political power for workers."

According to Cecilia, "You don't have to be illegal in order to be exploited in the United States; being Mexican or even just having Mexican ancestry is sufficient to be denied basic rights. Even if you have resident or citizen status, you live in an atmosphere of isolation and disinformation. Documents don't protect you from verbal, physical or sexual abuse in the factories. Many of those we work with are victims of illegal practices in their place of work." Cecilia also talked about some of the difficulties in organizing Chicanas and Mexicans, given the many years of division and mistrust within communities. "In certain areas, like El Paso, Los Angeles or around Chicago, the communities are very well integrated. However, there are places where residents report undocumented workers to "la migra" (immigration officials) because they believe that undocumented Mexican workers are taking away their jobs. When they become politicized that's one of the first things they stop doing. They only need education and conscientization. This is crucial in a country like the United States where things are so different, where you don't see people living in cardboard boxes, but where there are people who kill migrants and blacks.

"In many cases, those who were eligible for amnesty are the most afraid to participate because they have the most to lose. However, they too will participate once they've had access to political education, because they are also exploited."

New Organizing Strategies

The internationalization of work demands new and creative forms of organizing. Cecilia shared some of the strategies being implemented by *Mujer Obrera*. "We combine study, action and reflection where all of us can better understand how we fit in this society, and what our rights are. That knowledge is the basis for developing our plans of action. We organize demonstrations, public rallies and monthly meetings to educate the community about the problems in the factories. We have also carried out acts of civil disobedience. For example, last year we chained ourselves to the sewing machines in one of the factories in El Paso to protest the working conditions. They detained and jailed various women. We responded by organizing a hunger strike until the women were freed. We are also developing legal strategies to change existing laws concerning wages and regulation of small sewing businesses. We employ every tactic we can to make the political system responsible for displaced workers.

"We rely a lot on volunteer labour, something which perhaps wouldn't be seen as much of an achievement in Mexico but here in the United States, where everything is bought and sold, it's very important - we couldn't have gotten to where we are without it."

Outside the union mainstream

Unfortunately, *Mujer Obrera* is not participating in the recently-formed *Maquiladora Coalition*. Cecilia explains: "Other member organizations have invited us to join, but the AFL-CIO has opposed the invitation. They don't recognize us as a legitimate workers' organization because we are women, and because we are not a union.

"As yet, we have not wanted to take on this battle because at the moment we have other priorities. But we are determined to overcome every obstacle in our path, whether they be placed there by the corporations, the unions or our families.

Disappearing borders

"Since the 1970's we have been losing jobs in the steel, auto and mining industries. And we expect that with the new Free Trade Deal unemployment will increase, and the crisis in Mexican and U.S. cities will grow. Companies are erasing the border between Mexico and the U.S., and they're going to put all of us in the street. This isn't real development, because the companies are not investing in any social infrastructure. They are just using the work force and when they don't need you any more they go on to somewhere else where they can get more profit. They are imposing the U.S. model of development on Mexico, a model through which the rich get richer and the poor poorer. Chicanos, residents, undocumented workers and immigrants know that they are in danger of losing their jobs. They want to blame someone, burn bridges. But others want to better understand what is happening. One thing is certain. This is a time of crisis and we are being made to pay."

To contact *Mujer Obrera*, write *Mujer Obrera/Centro Obrero*, P.O. Box 3975, El Paso, Texas 79923.

Mercedes Lopez is a member of the Mujer a Mujer collective.

[To contact *Mujer a Mujer/Woman to Woman* in Canada telephone Linda Yanz (416) 532-8584.]

Abortion: Testing the Waters

by Elaine Burns

[Reprinted with permission from *Correspondencia*, published by *Mujer a Mujer*, a collective of Mexican, U.S., Canadian and Caribbean women based in Mexico promoting communication, exchange and strategic connecting among activist women throughout our region.]

National headlines December 16 announcing that abortion "for purposes of family planning" had been de-penalized in the [southern-most Mexican] state of Chiapas caught feminists and the Church hierarchy equally by surprise. The issue, buried from public view since the 1980 defeat of the proposed Legislation for Voluntary Motherhood, was thus

suddenly launched once again into the centre of national debate.

Many suspect that the Chiapas legislation was an attempt to "test the waters" in response to pressure from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank for population control. They point to the fact the Chiapas is one of Mexico's poorest and most indigenous states, with a notorious record of sterilization abuse.

Feminists have moved quickly to organize. At a January 8 meeting which had the combined spirit of a 10-year reunion and a victory rally, representatives from some 60 unions, cultural groups, political parties, feminist collectives, peasant and indigenous councils, gay and lesbian

and neighborhood organizations joined to form the National Front for the De-Penalization & Legalization of Abortion. On January 15, some 2500 women and men marched to the National Commission on Human Rights to present their arguments in favor of de-penalization. They were led by a 10-foot papier mache figure bearing the sun on one breast, the moon on another, and Latin America down her belly. Numerous participants

wore costume masks and placards stating "I have aborted", and chorused the chant "Safe contraceptives so we don't have to abort. Free & legal abortion so we don't have to die!" After dark participants marched on to the U.S. Embassy. As they neared their

destination, their calls to "abort this criminal war" were thundered back to them in a warm and joyous welcome by some 10,000 punks, university students, and assorted citizenry already gathered there in a spontaneous vigil for peace.

Amalia Garcia, long-time abortion activist, now congressional representative for the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), reflects: "We're in a lot better place now than when we first presented the Voluntary Motherhood legislation through the Left Coalition in 1979. At that time, we were totally unprepared for the anti-feminist, anti-communist witchhunt launched by the Right..."

Sandinista Seminar

By Nancy Farmer

In mid October, I represented Tools For Peace at a FSLN Solidarity Conference in Managua. There were 217 participants, including 35 from Nicaragua. The bulk of the participants came from the US, approximately 80, but there were respectable turnouts from Mexico and Western Europe. Seven Canadians attended the conference, 3 who actually reside in Nicaragua and the rest of us from Toronto (3 from Canadian Action For Nicaragua & myself). The Nicaraguans took the event very seriously, and many of the Commandantes, such as Thomas Borge, Sergio Ramirez and Daniel Ortega, were in attendance.

It was a complicated visit for me, and difficult. It was very disheartening to see the changes going on within the country. This was my fourth visit to Nicaragua, but my first since the UNO Coalition came to power in February 1990. Although there is strong opposition to UNO's policies, it is obvious that with support from the American government they are slowly dismantling the achievements of the Sandinista Revolution.

I would like to divide this article into two sections. The first section will describe the conference itself and the final section will deal with my impressions of Managua.

The Conference

There were three main objectives of the Conference:

- to acquaint the solidarity movement with the resolutions of the FSLN and its First Congress;
- to exchange analysis of the current situation of the Sandinista Revolution and the Solidarity Movement, within the framework of National and International events; and,
- to jointly decide upon a plan of action for the near future, in support of the Sandinista Revolution.

The conference was organized in a manner which encouraged participation. In the mornings there were panel discussions, followed by questions

and in the afternoons we broke into workshops. On the third day there was a plenary session to approve or amend the resolutions that had come forward from the six workshops. I believe that there was open and frank discussion and then after three days we arrived at a common analysis of the world situation today and a consensus on where we should go from here.

We reached the following conclusions:

- As solidarity activists, we must place ourselves in the new world order. The dissolution of the Eastern bloc and the consolidation of U.S. power in an imperialist and monopolist world has made our work more difficult.
- The austerity measures that have been imposed on the "third world" have also been applied in the industrialized countries where they affect the working class majority and result in social programme cut-backs and high unemployment. These measures have given us the opportunity to form two-way solidarity between Nicaragua and other countries in the search for alternatives to the imposed neoliberal model. The interventionist scheme of structural adjustment and restructuring of society, American style, is not going to push the third world along the road of sustained development and self-sufficiency.
- The solidarity movement endorses the FSLN and its programme of struggle to maintain the gains of the revolution.
- In order to develop an integral, autonomous and humanistic solidarity movement with an anti-imperialist content, we must establish a relationship with the national struggles against racism, sexism, consumerism and all forms of national oppression.

- In order to strengthen our organizations we must improve our communication and allow for open dialogue that permits criticism and self-criticism.

- Promote solidarity with Cuba and speak out against the blockade and any other imperialist aggression.

Resolutions were also passed in support of the FMLN, human rights in Guatemala, self determination in Puerto Rico, the return of the elected President in Haiti, and the PLO.



As a result of these conclusions we arrived at the following plan of action. We must:

- Support the FSLN politically and financially - including the support of FSLN reps abroad.
- Begin the leg work now, to prepare for a more favourable attitude if the FSLN is to retake power in 1996.
- Create a network of lobbyists for our cause around the world now that the Sandinista Revolution has disappeared from international attention in order to promote alternative information.
- Support the FSLN in its efforts to eradicate discrimination against women and to develop women leaders within the party.
- Help find financing and alternative markets for collectives and worker-owned enterprises.
- Strengthen the work of the popular organizations through twinning cities, and support programs in towns where the Sandinistas won the election
- Be committed to breaking the news blockade by disseminating information and by supporting publications such as *Barricada International*.
- Ensure that the solidarity movement becomes multi racial and multi cultural

Impressions of Managua

It is difficult to describe Managua to someone who has never seen it. For those of you that have, you will probably appreciate my comments more.

At first glance Managua looked much the same. In some cases it even looked better. Crews of men were busily repairing the roads, building side walks and participating in a general cleanup. The few shops I visited were bursting with goods that hadn't been available during the blockade, such as giant boxes of Tide laundry soap, Aquafresh toothpaste, Kleenex toilet paper and Miller beer.

However, I soon realized that all was not as it appeared. Only a few Nicaraguans are benefiting from this new bonanza. Money is coming in from an American aid organization to beautify Managua. It provides only short term work and does nothing to benefit the average Nicaraguan in the long term. And the American products that are flooding the market are only affordable for a few. Further, these duty free imports are forcing Nicaraguan industries to close, as they can no longer compete.

Gone also are the Sandinista billboards that before would offer information on the rights of women or how to prevent disease. They have been covered up by advertisements for Castrol Oil, televisions, and computers. The FSLN letters have been removed from the mountain. However, the Sandinistas did get the last laugh. Shortly before handing power over to the UNO coalition, they constructed a 30 foot silhouette of San-

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Veteran activist Norma Vazquez confirms Garcia's optimism. "The feminist movement has matured tremendously in the last couple of years. We've left behind our byzantine discussions and political purism. We took a big step last year when we worked to develop a coalition among all women legislators - from right to left - and were thus able to pass landmark legislation on sexual

though the Chiapas legislation is couched in family planning rather than feminist terms, we were able to recognize its possibilities. We're not going to focus on a women's right to choose right now, which would keep us on the sidelines, but rather on abortion as an issue of public health and social justice." Meanwhile, ProVida (Right to Life) organized their own march, calling for the repeal not only of the Chiapas reform but provisions in existing laws providing for abortion in the case of rape and genetic defects. According to ProVida national president Jorge Serrano Limon, "Chiapas is the door ... to Mexico, and Mexico is the door to Latin America."

Limon announced at a recent press conference that ProVida worked with local police last year to detect, shut down, and arrest medical personnel and clients of ten clinics where abortions were being performed. In one of the most widely publicized cases in

Mexico City, doctors and women who had undergone the procedure only hours before were tortured by local police seeking to obtain confessions.

As the debate rages on, Rocio Hernandez, 20 year old Tzotzil indigenous domestic worker, awaits trial in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas. She was turned over to police on November 26 by local public health clinic workers who suspected that her severe haemorrhaging had been caused by a self-induced abortion. She remained in jail throughout the brief period during which the de-penalization was in effect, because the local judge ruled that the new law was not retroactive. On January 10, she was finally released on bail.

According to Norma Vazquez, the hardest work lies ahead. In order for abortion to be economically accessible, it must not only be de-penalized but legalized. In addition, Vazquez

asserts, any progress in abortion legislation will require close vigilance to ensure that poor and indigenous women are not coerced to abort.

Whether abortion is legal or not, women continue to resort to it. With four days' minimum wages, one can buy an armload of dark, pungent herbs from "curanderas" in the Sonora market just blocks from downtown Mexico City. The resulting brew provokes severe internal contractions which will partially or completely expel the contents of the uterus. Cheaper and of more dubious effectiveness are caustic douches and strong doses of a spasmodic available at the local pharmacy. Or, for \$10 to \$20, a neighborhood midwife will administer injections of "calgluquina" or insert a surgical tube into the uterus. A first-trimester abortion by a doctor in a clinic costs from \$300 to \$1000.

[Elaine Burns is a journalist working in Mexico.]



violence and harassment."

"This year," she continues, "even

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dino and mounted it on a hill in the centre of Managua. From every part of the city, you can see Sandino looking over you.

The National Reserves in Nicaragua's National Bank may be expanding but the quality of life for most Nicaraguans is diminishing. Eighty percent of Nicaraguans are living in poverty and 40% of them in extreme poverty. 48% are unemployed or working in the informal sector.

There have been massive cutbacks in health and education. The milk programme for school kids has been cut. There is less money going into these areas now than during the height of the contra war, even though the military budget has now been cut by two-thirds. Today, spending on social programmes is less than half of what it was in 1989.

And there is always the danger of civil war breaking out. Very recently the tomb of Carlos Fonseca, a hero of the revolution, was bombed by reactionary UNO supporters. Sandinista supporters retaliated by bombing the Mayor's office. In the countryside ex-contras are regrouping as "recontras" and have been attacking co-operatives and peasants. Ex-Sandinistas, wanting to protect themselves, are joining together as "recompas". The situation is tense. In towns where the UNO won a majority, the mayors are threatening to dismantle the Sandinista police and form their own police. If this happens, Daniel Ortega swears that the Sandinistas will arm their people into popular militias.



However, there are still reasons to feel optimistic. Many Nicaraguans are organized into grassroots organizations and unions representing workers in industry, in health care

and in education. And they are continuing to challenge the severe policies of the UNO government. As I write this article, five sugar mills are being occupied by workers protesting the fact, that the government is attempting to privatize them. Areonica workers were protesting at the Ministry of Labour while I was in the country. There is also opposition to an attempted privatization of the airline.

The ATC, the farm workers union, has scored remarkable victories. It forced the government to turn over to the union and its members 35% of the former state farms, representing valuable coffee, cotton and cattle farms. The members now own, manage and run these farms. It is a brave experiment and an enormous challenge. In the midst of an economic crisis, Nicaragua's "campesinos" are creating new alternatives to their government's harsh policies.

I returned from Nicaragua feeling optimistic that there is still a role for International solidarity to play. I am more convinced than ever than we must confront the world wide enemies, imperialism and "structural adjustment", not just in Nicaragua but also in our own country. Although most Canadians don't face the same hardships of Nicaraguan workers and peasants, the political and economic forces that we confront are increasingly similar. Government cutbacks, job loss, privatization, foodbanks, violence and homelessness are issues that we are dealing with more and more everyday. The consensus that we reached at this conference is that we must build a bridge between not

just the activists in Nicaragua and Canada, but between activists world wide, so that we can counter the right-wing and implement a system that benefits the majority.

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Child care is the biggest problem

The most insulting and dangerous part of this myth is the part that claims women can look after young children and work at an additional occupation at the same time. This completely negates the amount of time and effort required for adequate child care and condones child care situations that range from poor to harmful. Most of the homeworkers interviewed by the ILGWU worked more than 50 hours per week, 70 hours during busy times, and continued to be simultaneously responsible for all child care and house work.

Homework is sometimes promoted as a route to employment equity for disabled people. Instead of making the work place accessible and integrating disabled workers, work could be sent out to their homes. Bell Canada recently initiated such a program of employing disabled workers for homework. The Communications Workers' union was accused of being a barrier to employment equity when it put a stop to the practice. The union does not believe that doing the same work that is done in the employer's workplace in isolation and without union protection is employment equity.

Campaign for better treatment

Eliminating the exploitation of immigrant women working as garment workers in their homes will take some radical economic and social changes. It would take a system of affordable, accessible, quality child care for all parents; English-as-a-second-language training and skills training for people for need it; an economy with plenty of well-paid jobs; longer paid maternity leave; employment equity for women, visible minorities, disabled peoples and other socially disadvantaged groups; complete unionization of the garment industry and other industries; the list is long.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union has initiated a coalition of labour, women's and immigrants' groups to launch a "CAMPAIGN FOR FAIR WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS FOR HOMEWORKERS".

Initial members include the Ontario Coalition of Visible Minority Women, the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, Parkdale Community Legal Services, the Workers' Information and Action Centre of Toronto and the Chinese Workers' Association.

Ontario's Women's Directorate has indicated their support for the coalition.

While the Coalition doesn't pretend to be able to achieve the profound social and economic changes described above, it plans to carry out the campaign on a number of different fronts. In December the Coalition will present a brief to the Ontario government and opposition parties suggesting changes to the Employment Standards Act, its regulations and enforcement as well as the Labour Relations Act. These measures would offer homeworkers greater protection under the law, "pierce the corporate veil" by making the big retailer or manufacturer at the top of the pyramid responsible for wages and working conditions at the bottom and allow the union to bargain more effectively for the whole sector.

The need for these measures will be kept in the public and political "eye" through an effective media and public education campaign. The Ontario Federation of Labour will be asked for its support at the November convention.

Homeworkers' association

The ILGWU and other organizations will go to set up a homeworkers' association that can provide contact and support, employment information, some access to legal assistance, and possibly access to a benefits package. The union is also setting up training programs for unemployed garment workers which it will offer to union and non-union members as well as homeworkers.

Finally, the Coalition is planning a conference for next spring that will put the issue of homework in the context of the expansion of all types of precarious employment, especially for women, of global economic restructuring and of working conditions internationally. They hope to bring women from Mexico, the U.S. and England to participate in the conference.

[For more information contact Shelly Gordon at the Workers' Information and Action Centre of Toronto 392-1203.]



Cuba Must be Defended

by Judy Koch

Last August I went to Cuba for two weeks with the Canada Cuba Cultural Interchange tour.

We spent most of the time in a camp for international and Cuban volunteer workers helping in the construction of dormitories. Our own accommodation was dormitory style with separate dormitories for men and women. There was a free laundry service, a local store, and a cafeteria on the premises that served communal meals for the people in the camp. In addition to working, we had a chance to see different aspects of Cuban society. We went to a dairy factory where they made cream cheese, milk, yogurt and ice cream. There are few women in the factory and they are assigned to a limited range of "easier" jobs. They served us bowls and bowls of delicious mango ice cream and gave us each a package of wonderful cream cheese - much better than the Canadian variety.

We visited a farming cooperative and a state farm. In both places the workers live rent-free in modern apartments.

We toured a modern hospital in Havana. One weakness I noticed was the glassed-in wards which didn't offer much privacy. However, the hospital has a special department which tries to find jobs for all patients and ex-patients who can work. Close relatives of patients are allowed to visit continuously and even have beds supplied. One wing of the hospital was built with Canadian funds.

Different people were invited to speak to us. One speaker was from the Federation of Cuban Women. She told us that women have a much

greater variety of employment opportunities than they had before the revolution. Before 1959 women who wanted to work could only be domestic workers or prostitutes. Women can now be engineers, doctors or other professionals, but many jobs are still limited to men.

She said that birth control is now difficult to obtain in Cuba. Their only source of birth control is Eastern Europe, and little has been supplied since the crisis in Europe escalated.

A current scarcity of food has led to rationing. Cubans are trying to reach self-sufficiency in food in the next few years.

The U.S. trade embargo really hurts Cuba, causing shortages in machines and other essential goods. Cuba is trying to get the United Nations to put pressure on the U.S. to lift the embargo.

The Cubans are promoting tourism to get needed dollars and allowing international developers to build hotels. This is controversial because the international developers exploit workers.

Since 1979 there has been People's Power in Cuba: the election of people to provincial and municipal assemblies. Elected members are subject to recall at any time. The provincial assemblies elect people to the national assembly. Cuba is a democracy with greater say by the people than is the case in Canada.

Cuba does have limitations and problems but it is a socialist country and so is a step towards the future of humanity. Thus it must be defended against all enemies, especially U.S. imperialism.



MOVEMENT BRIEFS

International Women's Day

Look for the first meeting of the March 8th Coalition to plan International Women's Day 1992 in December. For more information call 531-5634.



Violence Against Women

The South Asian Women's Centre is holding a conference called "Violence Against Women: A Community Responsibility" on November 30, 1991. Speakers include Malika Datt, from Shakti and Jasmeet Gill from S.A.W.C.. For more information call 537-2276.

Arab Women at Work

"Arab Women at Work", a 25-minute video, offers views of the rapidly changing world of Arab women. It illustrates the diverse roles of women inside and outside the home and women's many achievements. Available from UNDP - Division of Information, NY, NY 10017 U.S.A. (212)906-5303. \$20.00

First Nations Lesbians and Gays

Queer Press is looking for submissions to an anthology by 2-spirited people of the first nations. They may be typed or handwritten, maximum 4,000 words. They will be edited by First Nations Lesbians and Gays.

Canadian Women's Archives

Canadian Women's Archives / Archives Canadiennes du mouvement des femmes is compiling a guide to records of the contemporary Canadian women's movement.

South Asian Women Write

DIVA is compiling an anthology of South Asian women's writings.



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