



New Haven/León Sister City Project

Summer 2018 Newsletter

The civic, moral and ethical insurrection for a “Nicaragua libre para vivir”

By Erendira Vanegas

The wave of protests that are shaking Nicaragua we call a civic, ethical and moral insurrection for being an unarmed and non-political movement. It began on the morning of April 18, 2018, led by a group of feminist women, members of civil society and senior citizens who went to the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS) to protest the reforms to social security. The group of protesters was repressed and assaulted by people close to the government, the so-called Sandinista Youth (JS). Days before, university students from Managua had protested the government’s limited response the Indio Maíz nature reserve forest fire and were repressed not only by the JS, who act as paramilitary groups under government orders, but also by the police.

By the afternoon of the 18th, the university students came out to show solidarity with the elderly and the families affected by the INSS reforms. The images shared of what had happened that morning in Leon showed how the elderly and protesters were brutally attacked by the JS, which brought with it indignation throughout the country. In Managua, students and other protesters were similarly attacked. The repression by the police, paramilitary groups and Sandinista Youth was so brutal that the anger of the people grew. They

continued to protest, and were now entrenched in universities for their protection.

In the first four days of the protest, more than 30 people were killed, mainly young people and students. The repression did not diminish, which led to the demand of the presence of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in the country. During its visit from May 17 to 21, the IACHR managed to finalize a report confirming that the state of Nicaragua violated the rights to life, personal integrity, health, personal freedom, freedom of expression and access to justice. These conclusions were reached through the courageous Nicaraguan people who denounced the aggressions on the part of the State of Nicaragua. The IACHR denounced: excessive and arbitrary use of the police force; uses of paramilitary groups; impeding access to emergency medical care for wounded protesters; illegal and arbitrary arrests; use of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, in some cases leading to torture; and intimidation and threats against leaders of social movements. Even with the presence of this human rights organization, the state violence did not stop but intensified - so the

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Leon mural above: 475 Years. We Have a History. We'll Create a Future!



Demonstrators protest against police violence and the government of President Ortega in Managua, Nicaragua, April 23, 2018. *Reuters*

IACHR also saw the repression firsthand - which leads us to reflect that there is no political will by the government for the cessation of violence.

The conflicts continued to escalate to the point where on May 30, Nicaraguan Mothers' Day, the mothers whose sons and daughters were killed in the protests organized and called for a march to demand justice. This march had the support of different social movements, including peasants, students, the Catholic Church, and feminists who joined “The march of the mothers”. Entire families went to the march, from the smallest to the elderly, babies in strollers, grandparents and grandmothers. There was an atmosphere of solidarity

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Nicaragua Libre continued...

for mothers who had lost their children. No Nicaraguan thought that on that day this march could be attacked, but the government did attack. There were snipers, the Sandinista Youth, paramilitaries and police attacking the crowd resulting in 20 deaths

The role of women from has been fundamental to the insurrection. I have seen women and girls raising barricades. They were also defending the barricades, active as leaders of the student and social movements, and providing food and medicine for injured protesters. In the north of the country, women banging on pots and pans have faced down riot police. On social media, youth proclaim: the revolution will be feminist or it will not be!

Yet the struggle of women is more difficult because of the macho cultural context we live in. Women are not only exposed on the barricades to be killed, but are also exposed to other types of violence, such as harassment and sexual abuse.

This is a popular struggle and there are no leaders with absolute control and at many barricades there is lack of control. At times there is harassment of women and alcohol consumption. Some criminals have taken advantage of the situation to infiltrate barricades in places and even charge citizens to move from one barricade to another. But there are some barricades that show signs that say: "In this barricade there is no toll", or "women are not harassed". It is clear that the population is writing its history day by day, and that only we, the population of Nicaragua, can do so by demanding the respect of all the international and national treaties regarding the respect for human rights that Nicaragua has signed.

As of July 24th, the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights (ANPDH) reported a total of 400 citizens killed. Many of them were

shot in the head, neck and chest, that is to say shot with intent to kill, and more than 1500 were injured. ANPDH also reported 750 kidnappings by paras and police. For all of Nicaraguan people, these are alarming statistics.

According to the ANPDH, 20 murders occurred in León. On June 15, dozens of barricades were erected to prevent attacks by Ortega's paramilitaries, police and JS. Among the areas with the most barricades is the indigenous neighborhood of Sutiava home to three NHLSCP team members.

As a Nicaraguan citizen, feminist, and defender of human rights, I could not have imagined this moral insurrection. Feminists since the 80's have been the most critical group of the government and have denounced violations of human rights, and denounced the abuses against the sugarcane workers and miners, accompanied the anti-canal peasant struggle, and denounced the electoral farce in 2016. We also denounced and made visible the corruption in the supreme electoral council and the lack of institutional independence in all state agencies.

Before the rebellion, some of us were aware that the political situation had to change. But what I see now in each march, in each activity, is a united Nicaragua. To be part of a sea of people in the streets overcoming the fear of being killed, is an incredible feeling. The spirit of civic struggle for a free Nicaragua, the chants for freedom, for peace but with justice, makes my skin shiver. Sometimes we feel pain, but also hope. With my family, neighbors and friends we join together to go the marches, as a group we feel more secure.

But to contain the tears is impossible. This struggle has a high price: the lost lives of mostly poor human beings who have defended the barricades. But also the cost of feeling oppressed by a regime, not feeling safe in the



Mujeral en Accion member being helped up after being assaulted by Sandinista Youth on April 18th at INSS protest.

streets, with fear to express opinions about the government freely, that my children cannot attend school because something can happen to them. Also there is fear that paramilitaries/police might come to look for me at my home because they have recognized me in the protests, and the impotence of not being able to do anything when the police and the paramilitaries are attacking the entrenched young people in the universities and defending the barricades. It is just heart-breaking.

The student leaders affirm in each protest that they will not give up the fight, and that they are willing to give their lives for the Nicaragua they want. Members of society affirm the same, even though there is an environment of insecurity and scarcity. The feeling is that the people are tired of 11 years of silence and fear, and are no longer satisfied just with early elections, but also want peace but with justice. We want to feel free and safe, and want to achieve this through peaceful means, and demanding respect for the right to life and the integrity of people. So we will keep demanding a "Nicaragua libre para vivir!"

Erendira Vanegas is the coordinator of the Domestic Violence Prevention Program and Internship and Delegation programs.

The Uprising and Economic Disruption

By Luis Chavarria

The political and social problems in Nicaragua made news worldwide. But the economic side effects of the uprising have led to significant economic disruption and, of course, are hitting the most vulnerable the hardest.

For some, it is still difficult to understand how a protest against Social Security reforms quickly became an incredibly polarizing event. These reforms were aimed at addressing problems at Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS) that many thought had been the result of mismanagement and corruption. For example, some salaries for INSS management are popularly called "Mega Salaries", millionaire salaries. Also, INSS investments are not audited by independent authorities.

It was in this context that President Ortega announced new reforms that consisted of an increase in the amount owed by those who currently contribute (meaning higher taxes); a decrease in benefits for recipients, mostly elderly, but also to widows, orphans, etc.; and finally, an increase in the number of weeks worked needed to be able to achieve the same current economic benefit when you retire. And all this without touching the INSS mismanagement and bad investments.



Paramilitary forces in Leon, or as they are popularly called, "Squadrons of Death".

In the main cities of the country, groups of people organized themselves to protest the INSS changes. The protests quickly began to create chaos in the city of Leon, with clashes between supporters of the government, police and protesters. On Friday, April 20, a half block of businesses were burned after confrontations between the police and protesters. There was some looting of businesses selling home goods, and Leon families began to feel the need to buy what they could of food and water right away. Businesses in the city center did not open the next day and fear began to spread throughout the city as the number of protest related injuries and deaths increased.

Classes were suspended at all levels, tourism started moving out of León, as it did in other cities such as Granada and Masaya, where clashes were also happening. In Leon different businesses such as hostels, bar-restaurants, markets and tourist centers remained without customers. Microfinance organizations and banks reported an increase in their rates of delinquent loan payments.

In the following weeks, León seemed calm but clashes continued in Managua, with additional deaths every day at all hours. This limited the free movement of people and merchandise around Nicaragua.

In the days after the first protests, blockades were initiated on the main roads of the country - organized by groups of students and civil society - to increase the level of pressure against the INSS reforms, and demanding justice for the dead and wounded protesters. At the beginning, the traffic stops were intermittent, allowing vehicles to circulate after a few minutes, which kept the city supplied with food and different consumer goods. But gradually, they increased the waiting time,

NH/LSCP Supports Social Justice in Nicaragua

We at NH/LSCP have been hearing about growing government anti-democratic manipulation for the past 10 years, but like most Nicaraguans, were shocked by state violence against the protesters. If the government had just sent the Sandinista Youth to harass the protests, or if the police had just shut down the criticism of the government, people would not have been surprised, because that's been the government's general response to protest for years. But the shootings day after day sparked much greater protests, and led to this crisis. Apparently the government felt scared enough by the nonviolent protests that it decided it needed to use violence.

Now it's very scary to see masked paramilitary groups roaming the streets of León, the type of forces that exist when governments want to commit violence with impunity.

At this point, every major institution is condemning the state sponsored violence, including major business groups and Catholic Church, both recently allied with President Ortega. Also the feminist and anti canal movements are calling for early elections, both of whom have faced state repression in past protests.

Underlining the grassroots nature of the "self-organized" uprising, Erendira Vanegas points out in her article, it was León partner organization Mujeral en Accion leaders who were some of the first to protest the social security cuts in Leon on April 18th.

At this point NH/LSCP is trying to decide how best to keep our staff and allies safe and free to continue advocating for social justice. We are also concerned about the economic impact the crisis is having on families and how we can help limit the damage.

Disruption continued...

which has had a greater impact on our fragile economy.

Civil society called for a local strike in Leon for June 12th to increase the pressure on the government. There were then reports of a group of people shooting at anyone they found in the streets, so families of all the neighborhoods began to build "barricades" (with cobblestones taken from the streets) blocking traffic in the city. Dozens of barricades were constructed in a single day, as happened in other cities.

The following day, Leon stopped completely. There were hardly any people in the streets and the blockades at the entrances to the city were abandoned because León itself was already immobile. Two days later, the organization of private companies in Nicaragua (COSEP) announced a 24-hour national strike, which kept the barricades in the neighborhoods up. There were reports on television and radio of groups attacking communities in all the cities of the country. The result of the barricades and generalized fear is that garbage collection in the city was stopped, and transportation of goods to stores and people to their jobs was very hard. Additionally, a collective hysteria depleted stocks in supermarkets and food stores.

In rural communities, school officially continues (although some teachers who are from the city cannot travel) and life continues normally. But the economic impact of the uprising is more concrete there when people need products like soap, vegetable oil, personal cleaning products, etc., that they can only get in the city. Rural families also need to sell their products (milk, vegetables and fruits) in the city so that they can then buy what they need.



Traffic backed up at highway barricade in Nicaragua.

The crisis sparked layoffs in some businesses which further exacerbated the impact on families' finances. There was also an increase in migration, almost exclusively to Costa Rica, and the banks limited the withdrawal of cash from their clients' accounts, and blocked new loans.

As of June 26th, the barricades in some neighborhoods have been removed by city workers, but the police, and groups related to the government, shot and arrested those opposing their removal. Daily, people leave home very early to do their errands and try to be home before 3 o'clock in the afternoon hoping to avoid any conflict in the streets. There is no public transport in the neighborhoods of Sutiava, Laborios, Guadalupe, Zaragoza and San Felipe, nor is there garbage collection, or maintenance service for most utilities.

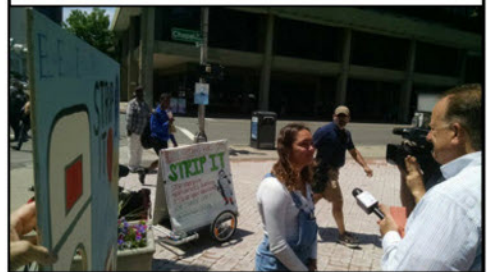
So, the uprising started as a protest to cuts in resources to families, and also against corruption. The protest and violence related disruptions have begun to create significant hardships for many families throughout the country. The hope is that a solution will be negotiated soon that will address corruption concerns (the government already rescinded the INSS changes), restore effective democratic institutions, and allow the economy to return to normal.

Luis Chavarria is the Coordinator of Public Health program and Office Administration.

New Climate Change Projects

This summer, NHLSCP again had a great group of interns contributing their time and energy to various climate change projects. The projects included developing a full climate education resource website for high school educators - the Climate Health Education Project; taking the goNHgo Live!CarFree campaign to the streets with car art; organizing a "Strip It" campaign to promote use of power strips and the Elm Energy Efficiency Project; and creating a new website - the Living Yard Project - to encourage conversion from grass to more natural habitat friendly yards to reduce carbon emissions, noise air pollution and save money.

We encourage you to check out these great resources online, and take action to combat climate change!



Photos, top to bottom: Intern Grace Gillooly presents new Living Yard Project at press conference with Mayor Harp; Elizabeth Rhoads being interviewed at Strip It energy efficiency campaign launch; Jordan Schmolka chalking back side of Live! CarFree campaign art installation.

Education in Rural Nicaragua Continues

By Ivett Fonseca

Since April, Nicaragua has been going through a social crisis that affects all its inhabitants in different ways, and education is no exception.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MINED) continues working without interruption as are the other institutions of the state. However, in the different cities some public and private schools have decided to suspend classes because of the level of insecurity. It is perceived that attacks or confrontations could happen at any time which puts the lives and safety of children at risk.

In León, classes have remained intermittent since April. Private schools have offered classes through virtual platforms. However, the general public does not have teachers or children with adequate technological resources to do this. These schools simply do not have classes, or in some, students attend and return home within a few hours.

When looking at the rural area we find another situation. The people of the communities often do not know what happens in the country. Also, in these places, only channels related to the government are transmitted, which have always reported that everything is fine and calm in the country. Access to the internet and other information not provided by the state is almost nil. So it can be said



Barricades built in León to stop police and paramilitary incursions.

that in the countryside there is misinformation about what happens in other parts of Nicaragua.

The orientation of the MINED is that the classes continue to develop normally, so in the month of April and May teachers who travelled from the city to the field continued to arrive. But after a local strike was held on June 12 (where more than 400 barricades were erected in León), it was impossible for the teachers to be transported to their workplace. However, the teachers who live in the community, which are the minority, continue to teach.

The Comprehensive School Nutrition Program (PINE), which it is intended to feed children who attend classes and raise their school performance, is suspended in schools due to the situation of barricades blocking free movement and the danger of attacks and clashes. This affects thousand of children in rural areas contributing to recurrent malnutrition in these areas.

The afterschool and preschool programs continue to be maintained and developed every day. We serve 55 afterschool children and 80 preschool children. The teachers consider that these are spaces of safety and learning for the little ones. The afterschool teachers Sonia, Yara and Hayde are from the community of Goyena. They arrive every afternoon from 2 - 4 pm to work with the children, where the children occupy school space to educate and inform themselves, have fun and eat.

One student, Yordin, attends the 4th grade of the primary school and his mother previously traveled every day to León to sell some fruits and vegetables that she bought in the community. But now it is almost impossible to travel every day with

NH/LSCP Board Statement Regarding Recent Violence and Protests in Nicaragua

The New Haven/Leon Sister City Project has developed in solidarity with the Nicaraguan people for over 30 years. Our mission is deeply rooted in the advancement of social justice. Nicaragua has recently experienced a very concerning surge of repression and violence.

- The New Haven Leon Sister City Project condemns violence against all people and supports a comprehensive dialogue that promotes peace and respects universal human rights as defined by national and international law.
- The New Haven/Leon Sister City Project values freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly as fundamental rights in an autonomous democratic society.
- The New Haven/Leon Sister City Project supports the right of Nicaraguan people to choose their own government and create the future direction of their society without hostile interference from other states or non-state actors.
- The New Haven/Leon Sister City Project proudly continues to stand in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua.

the insecurity. She says that due to the circumstances she has one more reason to send her son to afterschool classes, as NHLSCP supports students both with meals and helping him learn. Lesbia, a preschool teacher in Goyena tells us... "the only support we are currently receiving is from you" (NHLSCP) and this benefits 30 children that attend her preschool.

The teachers meanwhile say that they will be teaching every day, because they know how important the afterschool and preschool programs are to help the children. We consider that good schools are the fundamental pillars for our society and for the development of our country. The teachers who work with the project are aware that the only way to combat social ills is through education.

Ivett Fonseca is the NHLSCP Education Program Coordinator.



*NH/LSCP supports education
and sustainable development in
Nicaragua and New Haven.*

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Whether you would like to put your donation to work today or benefit us after your lifetime, you can find a charitable plan that lets you provide for your family and support NHLSCP.

More information at newhavenleon.org on the Give page.

