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# What Kind of Solidarity Movement Do We Want?

by Jan Adams and Rebecca Gordon

The destruction of the Nicaragua Information Center has led the two of us to do some thinking about just why it is we choose to do solidarity work — and what kind of organizations we want to build to do that work. We know everyone won't agree with our answers, but we think that this kind of explosion in an organization as important as NIC has been suggests that the whole solidarity movement had better take a look at these questions.

We're presenting these ideas as two individuals, not on behalf of any group or organization. We hope you find them useful.

We do solidarity work, work in support of revolutionary Nicaragua, because:

We are inspired by the example of very poor people overthrowing a greedy, exploitative regime and beginning a process of reconstructing their country as a more just society for all its members, and

We believe that the example of the Nicaraguan revolution — and the struggle here to prevent the U.S. from overthrowing it — has much to teach us about our own long-term struggle to reconstruct *this* country as a more just society. And we need that more just society for our own survival.

Because our solidarity work derives from both these sources, we believe that, deeply as we respect the Nicaraguan people and their political representatives, the FSLN, we must depend on ourselves to determine the nature and direction of solidarity work in our country. The Nicaraguans have demonstrated their proficiency at understanding their country; that is their area of expertise. It is up to us to develop our expertise in understanding our country so that our work has resonance among our own people.

Ultimately, the goal of solidarity work lies beyond impeding U.S. interventions in one country or another. Those interventions will stop only when they no longer serve the interests of those who run the United States. In the short-term that means our job is to make it difficult for them to

## Tomás Borge on Leadership:

"Being a *militante* of the [FSLN] entails heavy responsibilities....*Militantes* are leaders and not masters; they place themselves at the front of the people — but not above the people — to guide the people by their examples and sense of direction. They are leaders of conscious human beings and not of sheep; they earn the right to be heard and respected by self-denial and by the power of example, by being at the vanguard in the hour of sacrifice, of work, and of combat."

(Tomás Borge is the only surviving founder of the FSLN. He is currently Nicaragua's Interior Minister.)

run this country and at the same time intervene all over the world. In the long-term that means changing who it is that runs this country.

U.S. intervention does not happen by mistake or because of romantic right-wing adventurism. It happens because the United States is a modern-day empire, determined to dominate other peoples wherever it can. This fact has real, practical consequences for solidarity work, because it means that the Republican and Democratic parties alike are committed to maintaining U.S. dominance in the world.

We have many sincere friends among left-wing Democrats. But we should never forget that though their influence is a major channel by which popular sentiment can bear on the national elites, these friends nonetheless do not control even their own party. We can never pin our hopes on the party itself. It doesn't hurt to have friendly relationships with those individuals. But we have *power* because we are part of a massive movement — not because we have friends in high places.

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Since we view our solidarity work as a part of the long-term project of rebuilding this society along more just lines, it is important that our work and organizational structure reflect the kind of society which we aspire to build.

If we are trying to build a democratic society, membership in a solidarity organization should include an experience of democracy. "Democracy" is an often-used and rarely-defined term. By "democracy" we mean an organizational structure in which the people who do the organization's day-to-day work, or their delegates, make its decisions.

The United States is not, in this sense, a democratic place. In fact, very little in our society prepares its people for the experience of making decisions about their own work and lives. We have often seen open membership organizations fly apart when "cadres" of some political formation decide they must impose their own "correct" positions on the membership. Such "cadres" think they can bypass the longer, messier process of trial and error through which people learn to analyze and take action effectively.

It doesn't work. Such a group of self-chosen "leaders" may even succeed in pushing through some good decisions in the short run. But an organization run that way will always self-destruct in the long run. People will get tired of being told what to do by "leaders" they did not choose, whose analysis they do not understand, because it does not come out of people's own experience.

A word here about leadership. Both of us have been privileged in our lives to know real leaders, people who helped us do our work better. We think that real leaders do not impose their will on the people they hope to lead. Instead, they help people define their own will and exercise it. Real leadership empowers people to better think and act for themselves. Leadership works by attraction — the power of example — not by imposition.

Since the U.S. is an enormous, complicated country, our work must find ways to respect and include people of all sorts, especially the people who benefit least from the current distribution of power and wealth. Building a multi-racial, multi-cultural, anti-sexist and gay-positive solidarity movement is only just. And it's deeply practical.

We can learn something about just how vital

this kind of pluralism is to a movement's — or a nation's — survival from Nicaragua's experience. Early in the Revolution, the FSLN realized that only a genuinely multi-racial, multi-ethnic Nicaragua could survive. If they had not genuinely addressed the demands of Black and indigenous Nicaraguans, the United States would have been able to twist those legitimate demands to serve the counter-revolution.

Finally, people who in their hearts have already left the United States will never be able to build a solidarity movement — or any movement — in this country. Making revolutionary change is heartbreakingly hard work. It's a privilege of solidarity work to be exposed to the power of peoples' revolutions. Of course we get tempted to adopt someone else's revolution as our own; revolutions offer us such hope. Many North Americans have made the honorable choice to live in Nicaragua and commit their lives to Nicaragua's revolution. There is nothing wrong with that.

But those of us who do solidarity work in this country — who work to build the kind of massive movement it will take to roll back intervention — must have our hearts in this country. Otherwise we will never be able to understand it well enough to change it.

*We have worked with NIC since 1985, most recently with the Bulletin. You can write us care of our other publication, Lesbian Contradiction, 584 Castro St., Suite 263, San Francisco, CA 94114.*

**('Lesbian Contradiction' is no longer being published. You can reach Jan Adams at 'jan@janadams.com.')**