

Sandinista Revolution

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Under the direction of the Somoza dynasty and the influence of the Central American Common Market and Alliance for Progress, Nicaragua began to industrialize rapidly and expanded its commercial exports of agriculture during the 1960s and early 1970s. The overall economic growth statistics were very impressive during this period but, for the majority of the working class, conditions actually deteriorated. This industrial growth was accompanied by a huge amount of people moving to the cities to work in the expanding manufacturing sector and a lot less people working on farms.

In spite of all this impressive growth, the money didn't ever seem to reach the poor Nicaraguans. The unions which would have helped to get wages raised were suppressed by the Somoza regime which set the amount of everybody's wages. Prices weren't too high during this period, but just about when the 1973 OPEC oil embargo occurred, inflation in prices went crazy and the average worker suddenly couldn't buy enough food to survive.

By 1977, the richest tenth of the people in Nicaragua earned the vast majority of the money. What this means is that even though the average salary in Nicaragua wasn't very high, most people were making a lot less than that average. The highest average salary in Nicaragua was one thousand three hundred dollars per year in 1970. In the United States, families who make eighteen thousand dollars each year are considered poor.

Another problem with the economy was that there were not enough jobs for all the people who were moving to the cities. In 1970, only four percent of the people could not find full-time jobs. But by 1978, thirteen percent of the people couldn't find a job no matter how hard they looked.

One major cause of the unemployment was the 1972 Managua earthquake. Managua had been the manufacturing and commercial center of the country with more than 90% of the businesses located there. A huge section of the city was completely destroyed and, in spite of the fact that millions of dollars were sent from international donors to help rebuild the country, Somoza never repaired the destruction. Somoza's failure to help the country in its time of need was also a major factor which led to his downfall.

In agriculture, the small-landowners who lived on small farms and managed to feed themselves completely off of their farms started to disappear. The rich landowners began to kick people off of their lands so that they could make huge plantations to plant cotton on. Since the peasants no longer had farms to get food from, they moved to the cities to try to get jobs. But there were not enough jobs for everyone, so the rich just got richer and the poor got poorer. By 1977, 1.4% of farms contained 41.2% of the land in Nicaragua. Small farms made up 36.8% of all the farms, but they took up less than 1.7% of the space. All of these things added up to give many Nicaraguans terrible financial problems.

By the late 1970s, the people were ripe for a change. Then in 1978, an editor of the anti-Somoza newspaper *La Prensa* was assassinated and the people began to blame Somoza. The anti-Somoza guerrilla forces under the leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (the FSLN was founded in 1961 by Carlos Fonseca Amador, a prominent student leader who was killed by the Somozas in 1977, in the name of Augusto Cesar Sandino) began to physically fight the existing military and the country was suddenly in the middle of a violent civil war. The United States was so worried that a Communist regime would emerge from the chaos which had taken over Nicaragua by 1979 that they urged Somoza to resign so that a moderate group could take power. Somoza did in fact resign on July 17 and flew to Miami, Florida and then to Paraguay in exile. In 1980, radicals found him and assassinated him in Paraguay.

The Sandinistas took control of the country and created a team of five individuals to rule. Facing enormous obstacles, they tried to get the country back on its economic feet. The US helped them at first, but after they realized that the FSLN was very left-wing, they cut off their support in 1981 and they started to fund the anti-Sandinista guerrillas called Contras. Things started to get really hectic in Washington when the Sandinistas signed an aid pact with the former USSR in 1982. In November of 1984, national elections were held and the Sandinista presidential candidate, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, won in a landslide. He proceeded to declare a state of emergency and suspended civil rights in October of 1985. In lieu of these facts, the United States Congress voted to stop sending support to the Contras in 1985 and they didn't start up again until October of 1986 when Ortega's state of emergency ended in Nicaragua. A scandal arose in November of 1986, however, when it was discovered that the profits from secret arms sales to Iran had gone to fund the Contra warriors during the period when no aid was supposed to be extended. This situation has become known as the Iran-Contra Affair. Facing massive unemployment, incredibly inflation rates, and domestic and international pressure caused by the collapsing East-bloc support, the Sandinistas agreed to their first peace talks with the Contras in March of 1988 and a temporary truce was in fact achieved.

It is interesting to note that although the Sandinistas have been the subject of a vast amount of criticism, they were in fact responsible for toppling the oppressive regime of Somoza. The Sandinistas were almost wiped out in the late 60s but they revived. In 1974 and in 1978 they made dramatic raids that netted them tons of money and the release of their captured friends as well as the embarrassment of Somoza's regime. The Sandinistas were widely supported at first, but their programs of economic control caused them to rapidly lose upper-middle urban and rural supports. This program required the nationalization of many private industries, the confiscation and redistribution of private property, and mandatory service of every able-bodied man in the army.