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## Nicaraguan Teachers' Strike: Summary Of Issues & Reactions

by Deborah Tyroler

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In late May about 2,000 elementary and secondary school teachers in Managua, Leon, Chinandega and elsewhere went on strike demanding higher wages and benefits. Affected schools announced that classes would resume early in the week of May 29. Nicaraguan teachers earn 150,000 cordobas per month (less than US\$20). Average Nicaraguans and government officials, including President Daniel Ortega, acknowledged the legitimacy of the teachers' demands. But, officials argued that at present a pay hike for public school teachers costing an estimated 71 billion cordobas would aggravate inflation. Since implementing draconian spending cuts early this year, the monthly inflation rate dropped from 100% in January to 12%. The austerity measures included the layoff of over 30,000 public employees. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) accused the rightwing labor federation, the Central de Unidad Sindical (CUS), of manipulating the teachers' strike. On May 25, President Ortega announced that two US diplomats had been ordered to leave the country: Kathleen Williamson Barmon, a Central America labor affairs attache, whose office is located in Tegucigalpa (Honduras); and, Joel Franklin Cassman, in charge of economic and commercial affairs at the US Embassy in Managua. According to a report by FSLN newspaper Barricada, Williamson Barmon and Cassman attended a CUS-sponsored teachers meeting in Chinandega on May 24, where they "incited teachers to disobey Nicaraguan laws, offering them economic aid if they confronted authorities." Between May 23 and May 25, Barmon and Cassman met with leaders of major opposition organizations, including the Coordinadora, the Nicaraguan Workers Confederation (CTN), the General Workers Confederation (CGT), the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), and the newspaper La Prensa. The two diplomats also met with longshoremen in Corinto. Barricada reported that Barmon and Cassman's purpose was to unify Nicaraguan opposition to government economic measures and the electoral process. An incentive for such unity was provided in the form of cash for "successful" demonstrations. [Williamson Barmon has apparently caused a stir in Honduras as well. According to Hector Hernandez Fuentes, leader of the United Federation of Honduran Workers (FUTH), at a mid-April meeting of the Honduras/US Chamber of Commerce in San Pedro Sula, Barmon "publicly stated that all unions affiliated with FUTH are instruments of the Soviet Union." Fuentes holds Barmon responsible for violence committed against FUTH members.] A similar sequence of events preceded the expulsion in July 1988 of Ambassador Richard Melton and seven other US diplomats from Nicaragua. Melton and others were accused of instigating a violent demonstration in Nandaime, a town located close to Managua. Days before the Nandaime imbroglio, Melton had attended an opposition meeting in Esteli where the rallying cry was the intent to establish a "Government of National Salvation." The existence of a scheme to provoke violent demonstrations and thereby discredit the Nicaraguan government was later confirmed by US House Speaker Jim Wright. Wright was sharply condemned by Republican Party bosses at the time. [Some political analysts argue that Wright's boldness in challenging the Reagan administration's Central America policies and other touchy matters was the real reason Republicans suddenly experienced overwhelming concern for the ethics of public servants.-Ed.] Some members of the opposition have cautiously approved the expulsion

of the two US diplomats. But La Prensa, which offered less substantive coverage of the teachers' strike than Barricada, published an editorial asserting that "the US diplomats in Chinandega gave the Sandinista government an excuse to minimize the true social problem facing teachers." The Nicaraguan government confirmed that 2,000 of the country's 36,000 elementary and secondary school teachers walked off the job. The government also acknowledged the legitimacy of their complaints, but said pay hikes would aggravate inflation. Instead, officials urged civic and labor organizations to assist in reducing teachers' economic difficulties. Private companies, cooperatives and unions have contributed to teachers' funds. The Association of Rural Workers, for example, said it would set aside land for teachers to cultivate on weekends, and will sign collective contracts with private and state firms offering benefits to rural educators. A 25 million cordoba (\$8000) monthly teachers' fund has been established by labor groups and businesses in San Rafael del Sur and by the municipality. ENABAS, the state-run grains distributor, has announced it will sell to teachers at reduced prices. Many Nicaraguans would like to see the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and government bureaucrats dig into their pockets, too. One of the teachers' demands is for decentralization of the Ministry of Education and that greater self-management powers be delegated to local school districts. Such measures would presumably lead to the "compactacion," or laying off high-ranking administrators who are perceived as paper shufflers enjoying the privileges of air-conditioned offices and access to expensive cars (private or government-owned). President Ortega responded by arranging a meeting in Managua with teachers from throughout the country on May 31 to discuss decentralization issues and related demands. (Basic data from 05/27/89 bulletin by Nicaline News Network-NNN, Managua)

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