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## Nicaragua: Strike Spreads, Government Declares Strike Illegal

by Deborah Tyroler

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Last week, the 400,000 member National Workers' Front (FNT) called a strike to demand a 100% wage hike, unions' constitutional right to participate in the formation of national economic policy, and the repeal of legislation permitting the return of lands confiscated by the previous government to former, among other demands. Partial work stoppages and other strike actions commenced July 2. The FNT said it had responded to the government's decision to suspend negotiations with labor unions which commenced following large-scale strikes in May. (See CAU 07/04/90.) July 3: In a communique read by former president Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) national leadership said the strike was the result of the government's "dictatorial" economic, political and social welfare policies. The statement identified the dismissal of thousands of workers, reduction of credit to business, and cutbacks or elimination of social welfare benefits to employed workers as examples of such policies. Since April 25, President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro's government has devalued the currency by 578%, eliminated public service subsidies, and introduced a privatization plan. The FSLN leadership said the government's economic policies expressed the subordination of national and "popular" interests to those of the "Yankee government the [International] Monetary Fund." Next, the communique asserted that \$900 million in aid promised Nicaragua at a conference in Rome in early June should be used to benefit all Nicaraguans, to stabilize prices of foodstuffs and other basic goods, moderate currency devaluation, and for wage readjustments. The FSLN said, "We cannot permit a minority to rob and steal to enrich themselves at the expense of the national interest." Among other things, the FSLN says that the government has reneged on promises not to fire public employees, and that the unions are entitled under the constitution to participate in drafting national economic policy. FNT leaders said that about 50,000 workers had joined the strike. Certain high-level officials, including Central Bank president Francisco Mayorga, accuse the Sandinistas of having prepared "time bomb" to force the new government into adopting painful economic policies. Government officials declared the strike illegal, and asserted that the strike had attracted little support among Nicaragua's 100,000 public employees. FNT secretary general Lucio Jimenez said 42,000 government employees had joined the strike as of Tuesday. July 4: On Wednesday evening, seven strike leaders were detained for two hours, including Lucio Jimenez, FNT secretary general. Government officials said the arrests were meant as a warning to other labor leaders to refrain from causing disorder. About 3,800 telephone and postal workers joined the strike. Operator-assisted international calls were shut down. Telephone and postal workers were staging what leaders called a "crossed arms strike," similar to a sit-in. Radio Nicaragua reported that thousands of farm workers had gone on strike. Ramiro Gurdian, vice president of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), said the strikes were preventing the planting of cotton. He blamed the strikes on "hot-headed Sandinistas." Students briefly took over the state-owned Radio Nicaragua and National Television System to read statements in favor of the strike. July 5: Police made no effort to remove strikers from government buildings. There was no indication that negotiations between the government and strikers would take place. About 12,500 bank employees commenced a "cross-arms" strike: banks were open

but no service was available. Union leader Jose Angel Bermudez said that about 3,500 employees at the ministry of agriculture also went on strike. Strikes continued at other government offices, including the customs service and the foreign, labor, construction, transportation, commerce and finance ministries. Air traffic controllers at Sandino International Airport threatened to strike, and electrical workers announced they may begin scaled cuts of energy to the country. FNT secretary general Lucio Jimenez claimed some 80,000 workers in both the public and private sector were on strike as of Thursday. Ariel Bucardo, president of the Farmworkers' Federation, said 1,000 members were en route to Managua to support the strikers. He said his union was demanding that the government repeal laws permitting the return of land to former owners confiscated by the previous government. Notimex reported that strike actions had spread to food stores, banks, health services, international telephone service, and six of the country's eight customs houses. FNT leaders met with Labor Minister Francisco Rosales, who asserted he would discuss the wage hike only. Rosales told Barricada that the strikers were engaged in a "psychological war." July 6: COSEP president Gilberto Cuadra told reporters that the government must adopt a more "energetic" response to labor actions because it is quickly losing support. He said, "The authorities are totally isolated from the people, including political parties, workers and businesspersons...[ result of] this policy of permissiveness and complacency." COSEP vice president, and head of the Nicaraguan Agricultural Producers Union (UPANIC), Ramiro Gurdian, claimed that 37,500 ha. of land destined for cotton cultivation have been affected by work stoppages, and another 18,500 ha. are occupied by armed Sandinista sympathizers. FNT spokespersons said that as of Friday, about 120,000 workers in public and private sectors had joined the strike. (Basic data from Xinhua, 07/04/90; AP, 07/05/90; Notimex, 07/03/90, 07/05/90, 07/06/90)

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