Will the Real "Che" Guevara Please Stand Up?
Labor and Authoritarianism in Sandinista Nicaragua

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Introduction

As one approaches the heart of Managua, Nicaragua, from the country’s only international airport, it is impossible not to miss the giant statue, sculpted in classic socialist realist style, of a soldier thrusting an AK-47 rifle into the air. A slogan etched into the base of the figure read: "Sólo los obreros y campesinos llegaran hasta el fin." "Only the workers and campesinos will reach the end.” This Sandinista slogan, fashioned from the words of Augusto Sandino, the insurgent politician who battled U.S. marines in Nicaragua in the 1930s, is intended to remind Managua and its visitors of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional’s steadfast belief that theirs was a revolution made by and for the workers and peasants of Nicaragua.¹

It might come as a surprise then to realize that the harassment, intimidation, arrest, and even killing, of workers and peasants who peacefully criticized or protested Nicaraguan government policies was a regular event inside Nicaragua during the FSLN’s first period in power, from 1979 until 1990. In late 1985, for example, Alejandro Solórzano, a leader of the pro-Moscow Nicaraguan Socialist Party and, at the time, head of the major Nicaraguan Construction Workers’ Union, was arrested and held in jail by the Nicaraguan government for twenty-four hours. His crime? He had begun a hunger strike to protest the ceiling set by the

¹ The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (“FSLN”), or Sandinista Front for National Liberation, was founded in the 1961 in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. Relying on classic third world national liberation movement tactics, it led a mass movement to overthrow the corrupt Somoza dictatorship in 1979. It lost power in 1990 elections only to regain power in the 2006 presidential elections.

The nature of the FSLN today is hotly disputed, with several splinter groups having broken from the Ortega-controlled party itself. See, for example, Ernesto Cardenal, Sandinistas: no voten por el falso sandinismo (Sandinistas: Don’t Vote for False Sandinismo), EL NUEVO DIARIO, Oct. 26, 2006 (http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/imprimir/2006-10-26/32243). See also Steven Kent Smith, Renovation and Orthodoxy: Debate and Transition Within the Sandinista National Liberation Front, 24 LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES 102 (Mar. 1997). A detailed discussion of this process is beyond the scope of this article.
FSLN on annual bonuses awarded Nicaraguan workers. Solórzano was one of the first victims of a renewed Emergency Law put in place by the Frente allegedly to help the nation's battle against the contra rebels.\(^2\)

Widely respected human rights and non-governmental organizations documented many such actions. A report by Amnesty International released in early 1984 described the detention in November 1983, of five transport workers' union officials for alleged violations of the Public Order and Security Law. That law was part of a package of restrictions on civil liberties imposed by the government when a State of Emergency was first declared in March of 1982. The law forbade many traditional trade union activities, including the right to strike. The strike ban was lifted in August of 1984 in the run-up to Nicaragua's first post-revolution national elections, but was reimposed in October 1985.

Three of the five transport unionists were released in December of 1983, but two others remained in custody pending trial on charges of "sabotage" and "attempted assassination." Under the emergency law, a strike, the weapon considered fundamental to the effectiveness of a trade union, can be considered "sabotage." Amnesty concluded its report on Nicaragua by observing, "union members are frequently subjected to arrest and short term detention." A March 1986 update by Amnesty concluded that these actions constituted "a pattern of

intimidation and harassment.footnote{3}

The New York-based Americas Watch group reported in 1984 that trade unionists active in the social Christian oriented Nicaraguan Workers Central (Central de Trabajadores de Nicaragua, or “CTN”), one of the larger independent labor federations in the country, were arrested in 1983 for alleged "violent anti-government activity." But the report noted that there was "suspicion that the real reason for their arrest was their otherwise lawful exercise of freedom of speech and assembly." This report noted that some of the arrests were "apparently for holding meetings and conducting CTN business." In a separate incident, also described by Americas Watch, 18 members of the CTN were arrested in the Esteli and Jinotega regions of the country. Eight of these unionists were later released, but the ten others remained in custody at the date of the report's publication. One of these ten "died in custody under unclear circumstances."footnote{4}

Finally, the Geneva-based International Labour Organization (ILO) issued in the spring of 1984 a 33-page report detailing the findings of their investigations of violations of trade unionists' rights in Nicaragua. The report included the results of a fact-finding tour of the country in December 1983. The report was updated during the June 1984, meeting of the ILO and supplemented by several follow on reports.footnote{5} The report described allegations of illegal


arrests, beatings, threats, and union busting carried out by members of the various Sandinista organizations, including the militia, the police, the Sandinista Workers' Central (Central de Sandinista Trabajadores or “CST”), and the Sandinista Defense Committees. The response of the government to these charges was also recorded.

The ILO expressed "its serious concern at the large number of arrests of trade union leaders and members...and wishes to point out that measures designed to deprive trade union leaders and members of their freedom entail a serious risk of interference in union activities and that, when such measures are taken on trade union grounds, they constitute an infringement on the principles of freedom of association."6

Government representatives refused comment on many of the allegations, contended that in other situations the facts were too vague to justify response, and argued that many of the actions taken against the independent unionists were for "counter-revolutionary" activities. The Legal Advisor of the FSLN's Ministry of the Interior, however, told the ILO's representative in response to questions regarding unionists detained without grounds that "there may perhaps have been abuses on occasion."7

This limited selection of FSLN behavior could have been repeated for almost any period of time while the FSLN was in power during the 1980s. Rather than giving full support to the independent and democratic organization of the working class and peasantry, the FSLN did

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7 Id.
everything in its power to channel workers and peasants into organizations established from above, by the new Sandinista state and party apparatus. This evidence indicates an apparent conundrum: the FSLN professed a strong commitment to workers’ interests, yet seemed intent upon the suppression of independent expressions of these interests.

The above incidents shared two important characteristics: one, the activists expressed criticism of the regime; and two, the activists organized themselves into independent trade unions to express that criticism. Allegedly, the regime encouraged criticism through its system of participatory democracy. There were extreme limits to the genuine freedom of expression within that system. But Nicaragua’s independent unions were outside that system and were subject to particularly high levels of harassment under FSLN rule. What did the FSLN have to fear from an independent trade union movement? Why did the FSLN need to establish its own party and state-controlled labor movement? This article attempts to answer these questions by examining the general theory and ideology that lay behind the FSLN’s labor relations’ policies.

These are not just theoretical or historical questions. The Sandinistas recently returned to power in Nicaragua, with their long time leader Daniel Ortega elected President. Similar authoritarian, if populist, regimes are in power today elsewhere in Latin America such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia. In each of these countries there is talk of a “new socialism.” Advocates of Sandinista style politics laud the re-emergence of this so-called “left” in Latin America as evidencing renewed hope for workers and the broader poor. These movements are considered a “rebellion against neo-liberalism.” In Asia the Chinese communist regime remains in power in part because of its ability to retain a tight grip on its workforce through the All China


9 Id.
Federation of Trade Unions, or ACFTU. Now, China is spreading its power globally through investments in Africa and elsewhere and its ideological influence is even affecting the U.S. labor movement where some labor leaders are lauding their new links to the ACFTU. Thus, despite the collapse of the old Soviet Union and its satellite eastern European states in the early 1990s, bureaucratic and authoritarian movements remain a powerful social force in the post cold war world. Even anecdotal evidence adduces this conclusion: the ethereal image of “Che” Guevara is found around the globe, even in the Middle East where he is admired by fundamentalist elements. In fact, our understanding of the Sandinistas and the new authoritarianism of the post cold war era must begin with the intellectual influence of Guevara and the Cuban revolution he helped lead.

The Ideological Background

The Cuban revolution was an important model for the shaping of Sandinista ideology and policy. It is also to the Cuban revolution that one can turn to begin to unravel Sandinista trade union policy. In the theoretical perspectives laid out by Guevara and the organizational structures established by Fidel Castro lay the building blocks of FSLN policy towards its base among workers and peasants. The core tenets of Guevara's "theory" of revolutionary trade unionism were laid out in a speech to the Cuban working class in the summer of 1960. The July 26 movement had taken power in the first month of the previous year, without a great deal of labor unrest. But Castro immediately unleashed a five-day general strike to establish his credibility among Cuba's workers. With the complicity of the pro-Moscow People's Socialist Party, he then moved to take control of the relatively large and anti-Communist, independent Cuban labor movement. Guevara's speech, entitled "On Sacrifice and Dedication," laid out the

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basic political argument behind these bureaucratic moves.¹¹

Though there is no evidence that the Sandinistas were directly influenced by this particular speech, the closeness of the arguments made by Guevara to those made by the Sandinistas responsible for trade union policy is telling. No one denies Guevara's general impact on the leaders of the FSLN. Further, only the portraits of Sandino and the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío outdid the ubiquitous presence of the image of Guevara in Sandinista Nicaragua.¹² Finally, the key Sandinista who was in charge of party trade union policy during the 1980s, Comandante Víctor Tirado López, explicitly acknowledged the debt of the Nicaraguan revolution to the thought of Guevara.¹³ Tirado López was the FSLN leader with the greatest seniority on the FSLN’s National Directorate after Tomás Borge. He came to the FSLN from the Mexican Communist Party soon after Castro's 1959 victory.

The Chimera of Industrialization

Guevara opened his remarks to his audience of Cuban workers by placing the question of industrialization at the heart of his agenda, defining it as "the road to collective well-being in this age of economic empires." This would be "an exceedingly difficult road" for Cuba. In particular it would be difficult for the industrial working class. The Cuban peasantry were already "beginning to receive the fruits of [our] victory - they are completely with the Revolution." Unfortunately, because the working class had yet to receive "the fruits of industrialization, the fruits of the revolutionary movement's determination" they had yet to fully comprehend the importance of this process.


¹² Unless noted otherwise, this article describes the policies of the FSLN during its first period in power in Nicaragua from 1979 until 1990.

¹³ VÍCTOR TIRADO LÓPEZ, NICARAGUA: UNA NUEVA DEMOCRACIA EN EL TERCER MUNDO 52, 299 (Vanguardia 1986).
Guevara’s remarks targeted the political attitudes of the working class towards the development process as a particular barrier for the regime to overcome:

[W]e are starting, with hopes for a great effort, on the road to industrialization. At this moment the role of the working class defines itself. Either the working class completely comprehends all its duties and all the importance of this moment and we triumph, or it does not realize them, and industrialization becomes one more of the lukewarm attempts America has made to save itself from the colonial yoke.

To Guevara whether a tiny island nation of a few million people can triumph in the age of "economic empires" would depend on the sacrifices of a few hundred thousand industrial workers!

Guevara made, as well, what has become a standard argument in the literature of national liberation movements: that the reason the Castro-led revolutionary movement in Cuba was based in the countryside was due to the weakness of the working class. "Cuba," he said, "like all underdeveloped countries, does not have a forceful proletariat." Further, Guevara stated that workers in the industrial sector are privileged relative to the peasantry and, hence, the "solidarity of the working class" has been "destroy[ed]." A paradox in Guevara's thinking should now be apparent. On the one hand, the working class was too small and divided to overthrow a tinhorn dictator like Batista, but, on the other, it was thought capable of lifting an underdeveloped nation into the world economy.

Class Divisions Remain

Despite its weakness and privileges the working class remained a problem for the new regime because of its tendency to view itself as a working class. Guevara argued:

[T]he working class still retains much of the spirit, that made it see only one difference: between the worker and the boss - a simplistic spirit that led all analysis to precisely one great division: workers and boss. And today, in the process of industrialization, which gives such great importance to the state, the workers consider the state as just one more boss, and they treat it as a boss. And since this is a state completely opposed to the State
as Boss, we must establish long, fatiguing dialogues between the state and the workers, who although they certainly will be convinced in the end, during this period, during this dialogue have braked progress.

Hence, Guevara wanted to undermine the "spirit" (class conscious and militant, rather than simple) that had made the Cuban union movement a success under the old regime.

Whether or not the new revolutionary State was a "Boss" is central to understanding the tension between a national liberation movement and a trade union movement. To Guevara, and to the FSLN some years later and to similar movements today, because the vanguard organization had taken state power in the name of the working class and had established some form of input into decision-making for workers, then workers were no longer allowed to view the State as an adversary.

Instead of fighting for workers' basic interests, defined democratically from below by the workers themselves, it was now the role of labor leaders to implement State policies elaborated by the revolutionary vanguard. "What should be clear...is what Fidel said the other day: The best labor leader is not the one who fights for his comrades' daily bread. The best labor leader is the one who fights for everybody's daily bread, the one who understands the revolutionary process completely, and who, analyzing it and understanding it in depth, will support the government and convince his comrades by explaining the reasons for the revolutionary measures." This is, of course, "transmission belt" trade unionism so familiar to students of Stalin's Russia.14 But one should pay close attention, as well, to Guevara's concept of "everyone" when he argued that labor leaders should "fight for everybody's daily bread." At first glance, it sounds as if he was appealing to the longstanding concern within trade unionism for social justice. But, in fact, he was, as we will see below, attempting to erase the concept of a distinct relationship between the individual and society. This is essential groundwork for the evolution of a totalitarian ideology.

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14 See ISAAC DEUTSCHER, SOVIET TRADE UNIONS: THEIR PLACE IN SOVIET LABOUR POLICY (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1950).
Democratic trade unionism, on the other hand, fights for each individual's rights and out of that fight builds a social movement. Hence, such a movement is able to make a fundamental contribution to a progressive, industrial society.

Guevara's aim was to prevent the emergence of an alternative road to social change in Cuba. One tactic of national liberation movement theory was to set up a straw man in the image of so-called "bread and butter" or "business" unionism. The Sandinistas would refer to such unions as "economistic" or, even, "castrated." The reference was quite often aimed, in the developing world at least, at the unions established with the aid of the United States-based AFL-CIO. Generally, these unions first emerged, quite naturally, in the factories and on the plantations of U.S. multinational firms. Because of this association it was assumed by the guerrilla movements that these unions were incapable of building a strong opposition to politically repressive regimes in the Third World. There was a kernel of truth in this argument. In many instances in post-World War II history, unions tied to the AFL-CIO have, because of the American labor movement's frequent willingness to subordinate workers' interests to the general U.S. foreign policy, limited their trade union organizing to bread and butter issues that were not likely to threaten pro-Washington political regimes.

But the FSLN's or Guevara's critique of this stance ignored the potential for building a broader movement out of battles over apparently small, individual issues, whatever the intent of policy planners in the AFL-CIO's Department of International Affairs in Washington. Hundreds of trade unionists who are members of such unions have begun "simple" bread and butter struggles and found themselves jailed, tortured and even killed by Third World regimes. To spotlight the potential in such "narrow" efforts, one should recall that an event so important as Russia's February Revolution began when women workers demanded bread. More than sixty years later, the dismissal of a widely respected woman shipyard worker in the Polish port of

\[15\] HUMBERTO ORTEGA SAAVEDRA, SOBRE LA INSURRECCIÓN 73 (Editorial de Ciencias Sociales 1986).
Gdansk sparked a strike that led to the formation of national labor movement called Solidarity. In neither case was a so-called revolutionary vanguard the essential ingredient - only "bread and butter" unionism defending "individual" interests. Should not a revolutionary regime allegedly established in the name of the working class, fully expand and open up the opportunity for individual workers to express themselves, from below, through democratic institutions of their own making?

This, however, was not Guevara's agenda. His aim was to turn the energy and creativity of the industrial working class into grist for the mill of the State. This "does not mean that the labor leader should become a parrot," as Guevara argued, "simply repeating what the government says through the Ministry of Labor, or through any other majority. Of course, the government will make mistakes too, and the labor leader will have to call attention to them forcefully if those mistakes are repeated and if they are not corrected." He foresaw a role for some independence on the part of labor leaders - but only to point out mistakes, not to question the basic direction and organization of State power. This "is nothing but a procedural problem," Guevara concluded.

What, then, is at the top of the Government agenda for their new labor leaders? First, and foremost, workers must sacrifice without protest:

It is inadmissible, and it would be the start of our failure, for the workers to have to go on strike, for example, because the employer-state - and I am talking about the process of industrialization, that is, of the majority participation in the state - adopted so intransigent and totally absurd a position as to force the workers to strike. This would be the beginning of the end of the people's government because it would be the negation of all we have been upholding. But the government will, on occasion, have to ask sacrifices of certain types of workers....[A]t some time or another, we will have to face up to those [revolutionary] duties and temporarily renounce some of our privileges or rights at a given moment, for the common good.

It is here that the trade union plays a key role:

That's the job of the labor leader; to recognize that moment, to analyze and make sure
that the workers' sacrifice, if it is necessary, be the smallest possible one, but at the same
time, to show the worker comrades that the sacrifice is necessary and to explain why, and
to make sure that everyone is convinced.

Guevara, then, ruled out any independent policy role for the trade union leadership. They are not
to voice independent or individual working class demands much less consider promoting
alternative roads to national development. They are simply to implement sacrifices - convincing
workers to work harder, longer and with less money - precisely the opposite of the role that these
unions played prior to Castro's revolution. Perhaps most ominously, they are "to make sure
everyone is convinced." That is, they must now take on the role of disciplinarian, on behalf of
the State, of their own membership.

It should be emphasized that Guevara did not want to transform the role of the labor
movement in order to eliminate it He recognized openly that the State needed a labor
organization among workers - but not an independent and potential adversary. Rather, to
paraphrase the sectarian American socialist Daniel De Leon, Guevara wanted to build a cadre of
"labor lieutenants of the state." One advantage of this system we have already noted: the ability
of the labor leader to point out procedural mistakes by the State. Now a second role, much more
significant, is added: the need to implement through persuasion and discipline, the sacrifices the
State says the workers must make in the name of national development. "A revolutionary
government cannot demand sacrifices from above; they must be the result of everyone's will - of
everyone's conviction," Guevara argued. "Industrialization is built of sacrifices. A process of
accelerated industrialization is no lark, and we will see this in the future." This role for some
type of new labor movement is the first step in the establishment of a human resources policy in
third world revolutions. Under the Sandinistas, the need for such a policy would stimulate the
use of the more sophisticated program of participatory democracy inside Nicaragua's unions and
workplaces.

Revolutionary Development to Supersede Capitalism
Guevara then moved on to place his initial outline of the proposed new role for labor in a larger context. "By what means," he asked, do we intend "to develop our economy?" He examined the free enterprise system and asked his audience to compare it with the system of "revolutionary development." The former is anarchical, enslaving, and monstrous, Guevara said. "But there is another system. It is the system in which we face up to ourselves and tell ourselves, 'we are revolutionaries, the revolutionary government, the people's representatives'. And who do we have to make these industries for, who has got to benefit, if not the people? And if the people must benefit, and we are the people's representatives, we, the government, should carry the weight and direction of industrialization, so that there will not be any anarchy."

A form of "rationalization from above" lay at the heart of Guevara's conception of the new system. "When we need one screw factory, there will be one screw factory. When we need a machete factory, there will be one machete factory, not three. Let us save the nation's capital." This approach was to be taken towards wages, as well as capital investment: "We should never reward the worker or the professional, with a higher salary than the prevailing one, than the just one, in order to gain a social advantage or to destroy someone, because that is a non-revolutionary procedure. But we will always try to keep the workers' salaries as high as the industry will allow, always considering full employment our first duty, and after jobs for the unemployed, more work for the underemployed."

The irrational also emerged in Guevara's argument. With one sentence he revealed the central purpose of this "rationalization process" of saving capital and maintaining a general ceiling on wages: to begin the illogical process of industrialization in one country. "...[W]hen we need a basic industry, although it does not make money, although it is not the best business, we will build that great basic industry, because that is going to be the base for the entire road to industrialization." (Emphasis added) The central justification for changing the purpose and structure of the trade union movement, for implementing wage freezes and strike prohibitions, and for limiting freedom of expression, was to allow the State the freedom to pursue, Don Quixote-like, industrial windmills!
"Great Duties of the Working Class"

Having provided his working class audience with a general outline of the goals of the new State and the role of labor unions in the pursuit of those goals, Guevara moved on to outline three "basic duties of the working class." Keep in mind that these duties were announced from above by the new regime - they did not emerge independently from discussions among union members themselves.

"[A]fter analyzing the problems this country has had, we discover what are the basic duties of the working class," Guevara began. "Of course there are many duties, but in economic terms there are three great obligations, three obligations that sometimes even conflict with the common denominator the working class has made of its aspirations and its struggles against the ruling class, because one of the great obligations of today's working class is to produce well."

Guevara immediately preempted what he presumed would be the natural response of his audience, the audience that incorrectly viewed the new State as a Boss. "When I say `produce', the workers can say `that is just what the bosses said, and the more we produced, the more money we gave them, and the less they needed some comrade, and we caused the unemployment and increased concentration of wealth'." Guevara responded directly to the first of these concerns, though rather vaguely. But he ignored altogether the second argument - making clear that a new kind of concentration of wealth would be essential to his system of revolutionary development. "That is true," he continued. "That is why there is an apparent contradiction. But production right now has got to be, precisely, the production of wealth so that the state can invest more in the creation of sources of work, and it has got to be the type of production that does not cost anyone his job. We have got to invent constantly, develop popular initiative, in order to create new sources of work, sources that will demand the greatest possible development." (Emphasis added) In Guevara's view, then, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the State is the only solution to the problem of unemployment - the working class is caught in his developmental dilemma.
Linked to working harder in Guevara's system was the second "basic duty," the promotion of thrift and savings among industrial workers. Every penny saved, was a penny earned for the State. "I wanted to save this document. The comrades at CMQ gave it to me, and it is an outstanding example of what the working class should do. It is nothing more than the idea of saving the spools of all the country's typewriter ribbons, not the ribbons but their spools, to avoid having to import these items. This is another of the great duties of the working class, which is tied to the duty to produce, to save, always to develop its initiative so that not one centavo is spent unnecessarily. The wasted centavo does not help anybody, and if it is not put to work it will never help the workers. And each centavo saved is put into our foreign trade, or into the National Treasury. That is, it makes possible the development of another source of work."

Guevara then linked these two basic duties to State-centered development: "Production and thrift are the basis of economic development - production and thrift, I repeat, for the benefit of the workers. You cannot ask anyone to make sacrifices, to be more careful, to work harder every minute for someone else's benefit. It would be unjust to demand that. We are asking this wherever the state takes direct control of a factory's operation. More and more, the major factories - the ones we will build, of course - will be state-owned. The State's role will increase and the duty of the working class will increase too."

The Totalitarian Outlook

The third and final "great duty" of the working class is consistent with a central concern of Guevara's - that the State needs a vigorous labor movement, though one of its own making. "[T]he third great obligation of the workers, besides producing and saving, is organizing. Organizing, not in the old sense of organizing as a class against another class, but to organize in order to give more to the Revolution, which is to give more to the people, which is to give more to the working class."

Then, in a brief, but remarkable analysis, Guevara elaborated the link between his concept of the new union movement to a totalitarian image of the future Cuba: "[E]veryone is
being transformed into a worker, everyone who is directly concerned with production, and we have got to go on developing thus and thinking of the nation as a whole." Here was what the new workers, "cogs" in Guevara's new machine, must achieve by carrying out the "great duties":

[W]e have got to do exactly the opposite of what we have been used to doing. They had us used to a circle. We could cite the union, if there was a union, and then the neighborhood, the family, and then the individual, one person, who was the most important. Sometimes you could consider your child the most important; generally you considered yourself the most important. We have got to try to consider ourselves, the individuals, the least important, the least important cogs in the machinery, but with the requirement that each cog function well. Most important is the nation. It is the entire people of Cuba, and you have got to be ready to sacrifice any individual benefit for the common good.

Guevara then returned to the specific role of the union and union leader in this totalitarianization process:

And thus successively, each human grouping is more important than the individual; the whole group of a sector of the working class is more important than a work center's union, and all the workers are more important than one. That is something we have got to understand. We have got to organize ourselves anew to change the old mentality. Change the mentality of the union leader, whose job is not to shout against the boss or set up absurd rules within the order of production, rules that sometimes lead to featherbedding. The worker who today collects his salary without earning it, without doing anything, is really conspiring against the nation and against himself.

The worker, the union, the union leader - each were to flow together, hierarchically, harmoniously, in order to carry out a State-centered development process. Only if this was organized from above, with the consequent surrender of independent organization, personal initiative and freedom of expression, could the eventual goal of industrialization, of "revolutionary development," be met. The glue holding this process together would be a totalitarian ideology that puts concepts like "the nation" and "the people" ahead of individuals and ahead of democratic institutions and decision-making. "Hostile" unions or workers who "have not discovered the real meaning of the problem....should disappear, because our job, the
job of industrializing the country, the most important job of present-day Cuba, cannot be done, by any means, with the will of only a few or with the genius of a few, or of one man."

Sandinista Ideology and the Trade Unions

The basic goal of the FSLN has always been to break Nicaragua out of its mode of economic dependence and backwardness by development from above through authoritarian means. We now can examine the attempt to achieve that goal in direct relation to the Nicaraguan working class and trade union movement. There was no Nicaraguan "Che" Guevara: neither in the sense of an outstanding romantic hero, nor in the more immediate sense of a plain-speaking theoretician of national liberation movement policy able to articulate such a policy for a working class audience. One explanation for the lack of a "Che" as theoretician may be simply that one was been necessary. It could be argued that the Sandinistas needed simply to build upon what Guevara already outlined quite concretely. They did not need to repeat what has already been stated. There is some evidence for this in the various pronouncements in FSLN literature about "building on the great works of Marx, Lenin, Mao and ‘Che’."

A more instrumental view would advance a second explanation. Given the sensitive political situation during the period of Sandinista power in Nicaragua, where the private sector and the political opposition maintained a strong presence, the Sandinistas often "pulled their punches" publicly, appearing to soften or actually reversing moves towards strong State-centered development. This was one symptom of the "balancing act" which lay at the heart of the FSLN's relationship with its mass base and the private sector. A third possible explanation was that the social problems the FSLN faced were vastly different than those of Cuba and hence required genuinely different tactics. Thus, one extreme view expressed by Sandinista activists was that Nicaragua did not yet, in the first decade of FSLN rule, have what they called as "well-developed" or "well-defined" a situation as Cuba.¹⁶ The FSLN did not have complete control of

¹⁶ Interview with Sandinista Defense Committee Leader (Jan. 1989); See also TOMÁS BORGE, CARLOS, THE DAWN IS NO LONGER BEYOND OUR REACH: THE PRISON JOURNALS OF
Nicaraguan society in the manner of Castro and the Cuban Communists. Others suggested this euphemistically: Cuba was already genuinely socialist while Nicaragua was only on the road to socialism. I believe this argument is the strongest explanation for the absence of a publicly articulated Guevaran trade union policy, but I would add an important corollary. The lack of genuinely strong and independent trade unions in Nicaragua during the 1980’s made direct ideological confrontation with such a movement unnecessary. Sandinista activists usually only faced disgruntled or apathetic individual workers in their workplace organizing efforts, not standing unions independent of the FSLN. Hence there was a need to pay attention to problems like the motivation of individual workers and the rationalization of production, rather than the need to confront recalcitrant trade union opponents with a strong independent base.

But in place of an outspoken Guevara, the FSLN had several layers of intellectuals, party cadre and activists who clearly understood, if only implicitly, Guevara's "theory of revolutionary trade unionism." A survey of their arguments gives us a unique look at neo-Stalinist theory as it faced an ongoing revolutionary process. At a theoretical level are the writings of revolutionary intellectuals like Orlando Núñez Soto, Director of the Center for the Investigation and Study of Agrarian Reform in Managua. A longtime FSLN cadre, Núñez's writings on the "class forces" in the Nicaraguan revolution were well known among Sandinistas and influenced a wider debate among national liberation movement theorists throughout Latin America, the United States and Western Europe. Similarly, Carlos Vilas, an Argentinean who worked with the FSLN for many years, developed an overall perspective on the question of class and revolution.

The work of Núñez and Vilas aimed to understand the overall dynamic of the Sandinista revolution. In their view, that process had a great deal of relevance to revolution throughout the

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17 There were several smaller independent unions that may have grown larger in a more open Nicaragua. These were affiliated with various political parties, including a social Christian group, a union close to the AFL-CIO, and several associated with sectarian left parties. All of these groups found themselves harassed and worse by the FSLN.
Third World. In turn, they hoped that Third World revolutionary movements could impact political and economic developments on a global scale. Like Guevara, they, too, wanted to take on the "age of economic empires" with a form of "revolutionary development." To the field of international politics, such a perspective may seem outdated, simply a hangover from the "days of rage" or Paris, 1968. Because of the growing disillusionment with the state-centered development projects of the Soviet bloc, it may at first seem surprising to find a vigorous and intense debate emerging around such issues in the Third World and among supporters of such political views in the developed industrial world.

But despite widespread opinion in the West, it is clear that "free market" ideology, not to mention the capital investment which must lie behind this ideology, has been far from successful in winning the battle for the "hearts and minds" of the billions who live in the developing world. The capitalist world has yet to show its ability to solve the global problems of hunger, hyperinflation, debt, unemployment or environmental destruction. Though Russian-backed traditional "Stalinism" has largely been eviscerated from the former Soviet bloc, it is clear that a form of "neo-Stalinism" is taking a tentative one step forward in this part of the globe and continues to remain potent in Asia.

Hence, there continues to exist a "market," so to speak, for a cataclysmic, or revolutionary, alternative - one that feeds off of the ongoing crisis of capitalism, in spite of the strength of capitalism relative to traditional Moscow or Beijing style Stalinism. As José Luis Coraggio, an Argentine who worked in Sandinista Nicaragua for many years, and two U.S. social scientists, Richard Fagen and Carmen Diana Deere, argued in an essay during this period, the power of "socialism" in the Third World draws directly from the failings of capitalism:

The attraction of socialism to many groups and sectors in the third world often does not derive directly from either the theoretical power of Marxism or the organizational successes of revolutionary organizations and parties. What keeps the socialist vision alive in the context of underdevelopment is the lived history of the failure of capitalism. The failure of peripheral capitalism to deliver improved standards of living, social justice, and minimal quality of life to large sectors of the population in the small, peripheral societies
gives the socialist vision a dynamic that would not be predicted from a cool analytic look at the successes and failures of actually existing socialisms in the third and second worlds. Poverty, unemployment, rampant class privilege, dictatorship and disregard for basic human rights, foreign penetration and exploitation, are the deep subsoil in which the dynamic toward socialist solutions is cultured and takes root. At a very basic level, millions understand that markets operate to their disadvantage, even though they may not have the conceptual vocabulary to express this clearly.  

It is to this deep inherent discontent that the message of neo-Stalinism is driven home:

The socialist promise to replace a flawed and misallocating market rationality with a more rational and just social rationality (through planning, public ownership, etc.) has a large and potentially receptive audience (one might say a natural audience) in the periphery. So does the promise of democracy. When nationalist, antiforeign, and "you have nothing to lose but your chains" arguments are added to understandings of this lived reality, the appeal of socialism rooted in self-determination is potentially very powerful indeed. Socialist organizers understand these realities and the potential power of these appeals, just as their enemies fear them.

It is important to see the debate within Sandinista circles about their ideology in this overall context, for it is this context that gives so much fire to these "theoretical" efforts. In fact, it might be argued that the crisis of traditional Stalinism has actually freed the national liberation movement theorists from the excess ideological baggage of a close association with Moscow. It will be our concern here to analyze the overall perspective now emerging and to examine most closely those tenets of that perspective that relate to labor and trade unionism.

At a more concrete level are the speeches of Comandante Victor Tirado López, the FSLN National Directorate member who was in the 1980’s responsible for the Party's trade union and labor organization work. Tirado López spent much of his time as a FSLN leader traveling


19 Id. (Emphasis in original).
around the country meeting with workers and union leaders in a variety of settings. Finally, there is the FSLN's trade union cadre itself. These were the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of staff members and activists of the major Sandinista unions and party institutions who actually organized and implemented the FSLN program inside unions and the workplace.

A General Theory of Neo-Stalinism

One of the most intriguing documents in this debate is a small book co-authored by Núñez and an American, Roger Burbach. It is called: *Fire in the Americas: Forging a Revolutionary Agenda.* It was first published in Spanish in Nicaragua where it was granted that country's highest Social Science award, the Carlos Fonseca Prize. It was then published in English by Verso Press, an imprint of New Left Books, in its newly begun Haymarket Series, which aims to stimulate political debate within the left about North and Latin America. Núñez we have described above. Burbach is the Director of the Center for the Study of the Americas, a small independent think tank located in Berkeley, California. The book’s analysis of a potential road to power for left authoritarian movements has proven to be surprisingly prescient – pointing to the methods to be used by Venezuela’s Chavez, Bolivia’s Evo Morales and Ecuador’s Rafael Correa. In fact, Burbach’s Center is now at work on an update of the original text, tentatively titled *The New Fire in the Americas: Popular Challenges to Failing States and a Faltering Empire.* According to the Center’s website, the new book’s “central thesis is that there is a new rebellion in the Americas, one that provides hope and inspiration in the midst of a world ravished by imperial wars. It is a fire that is burning on many fronts, with differing intensities, one that flares up at unexpected moments in unpredictable locations throughout the hemisphere.”

The original text’s subtitle sounds rather ambitious, even presumptuous, but it should be taken quite seriously. This work represents perhaps the clearest statement yet published of what

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20 This author met and traveled with Tirado López on one such trip.
21 (Verso 1987).
may be called a "General Theory of Neo-Stalinism." In the words of Pablo González Casanova in his introduction to the English language edition: "By systematizing the thought that now runs so deep in the continent, [this book] will help to spread that thought more widely and to draw out implications for emancipatory action." The authors lay out the basic conditions and principles they believe should lay behind the road to and control of power by a bureaucratic anti-capitalist movement. In their own words:

Today the major challenge is to develop a political strategy and a theoretical approach that can bring together the diverse social movements in the Americas, break down their historic isolation, and challenge the dominant order. It is our belief that by drawing on the political experiences of the diverse societies of the Americas, from Chile and Argentina, to Peru, Nicaragua, Mexico, the United States and Canada, the left can collectively begin to develop the theoretical approaches and strategic priorities that will lead our movements into the twenty-first century.

Their argument has four distinct components. One, their advocacy of a neo-Stalinist revolution emerges in the face of what they see as the dual crisis of Soviet-style traditional Stalinism and Western U.S.-led imperialism. Two, this dual crisis has led to the emergence of a general striving for "democracy," whatever that may mean to its various independent advocates. Three, the disparate movements found around the globe for an authoritarian anti-capitalism need a new set of tactics, an alternative to the Soviet-inspired "dictatorship of the proletariat," now widely regarded as inconsistent with the general striving for "democracy." In its place, the authors posit a system of political alliances drawn from what it sees as the four basic "forces" of a revolutionary movement, under the hegemony of a vanguard party.

Finally, fourth, the authors lay out an integrated structure that should be put in place to firmly establish and manage a neo-Stalinist society. The key elements in this system are: a) a vanguard party; b) a network of mass organizations loyal to the vanguard party; c) a commitment

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23 Supra note 16 at xii.

24 Id. at 6.
to political "pluralism," allowing both the expression of conflicting views within the mass organizations and the establishment of non-vanguard parties - serving as a political barometer for the vanguard and as a steam valve to let off dissident social pressure; d) a system of participatory democracy as a means of both stimulating and harnessing the social will; and e) a mixed economy where the so-called "commanding heights" of the economy (foreign trade, banking, major industrial plants and agricultural properties) are held in the hands of the state, but private markets and initiative are allowed to stimulate competition and, hence, productivity in other sectors of the economy.

The dual crisis of the United States and the former USSR is not seen as an equal one. In their view, the capitalist West has fallen into a general economic and social decline that severely limits its political appeal. The East, on the other hand, appeared to them (just a few years before the collapse of Stalinism) only to be suffering a crisis of political credibility, caused by a certain narrowness in strategy. "The US empire and the capitalist regimes in much of Latin America and the Caribbean are in crisis, a crisis born of severe economic distortions on a global scale and of the exhaustion of the old political approaches used to contain mass movements," they write. "The resurgence of US militarism in the 1980s - the New Cold War and the ‘Reagan Doctrine’ - are reflections of this crisis. They are attempts to hold back the tide of social change and democraticization by marshalling the resources of the empire to maintain an ancien régime." 25

Or, "Due to the ever deepening fiscal crisis in the United States, the days of the Alliance for Progress - when the United States, could send billions in economic aid to prop up pro-US regimes - are long gone. Also gone are the times when US multinationals and banks rushed to Latin America and the Caribbean with tens of billions of dollars in new investments and loans. Today the United States can offer little economic assistance, only austerity programs and limited bail outs for a few US-proxy governments like Honduras, Jamaica, El Salvador and Costa

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25 Id. at 1.
Regarding the socialist world, Burbach and Núñez speak of a "crisis of orthodox Marxist theory." This crisis is linked directly to a critique of "the weak links in the ideological armor of the established socialist societies." These societies "have tended to adopt rigid and non-democratic forms of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ In society after society we find the party and the state setting policy with only minimal consultation or participation from the masses." But instead of firmly breaking with this history, the authors justify it as an inevitability: "In most revolutionary countries, even after the imperialist challenge was met, the material needs of society and the drive for economic production led to a continued emphasis on centralization and the growth of a bureaucratic state."

They only distance themselves from the worst aspects of such a system: "All this was compounded when the parties of these societies began to codify and put forth a reductionist or simplistic theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. one which justified the concentration of power in the highest levels of the Communist party. This model was then adopted by most of the new revolutionary states in the third world, thereby perpetuating the growth of a deformed socialist state." Even this effort at developing a critique did not prevent the authors from defending these countries as "socialist" nor from noting that this "does not mean that there were not democratic tendencies at work. In some socialist countries a certain positive tension does exist between the democratic aspirations of the mass organizations and the authoritarian tendencies of the party and the state."

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26 Id. at 42.
27 Id. at 6.
28 Id. at 1, 2.
29 Id. at 45-6
30 Id. at 38.
One is tempted to point out that claims about the existence of "democratic tendencies" in these societies are somewhat weakened in the face of the massacre at Tiananmen Square or the fall of the Berlin Wall. But such a response would miss the strength of the argument made by Burbach and Núñez. The validity of "Neo-Stalinism" lies precisely in its attempt to distance itself from the traditional Soviet-style Stalinist model of both the road to power and the consolidation and management of that power once won. A major step in this process is taken by their critique of Latin America's own Moscow-linked Communist Parties. They write:

The submission of the Communist parties in the Americas to the policies of the Comintern, reflected a fundamental weakness of Marxism in the Americas - its inability to develop and sustain an indigenous revolutionary strategy. While broad class alliances were certainly necessary at different stages in the 1930s and 1940s, they should have been determined by the needs of the struggle at the local or national level, rather than being dictated for all by the Comintern. The problem was that during the very years when the Communist movement reached its apogee in this hemisphere - the 1920s and 1930s - it failed to produce its own body of Marxist theoreticians capable of developing political programs and strategies suited to the specific political conditions faced by Communists in their respective countries. There were organic intellectuals in the parties who made invaluable contributions, such as Mariátegui in Peru and Julio Antonio Mella in Cuba, but in large part the intellectual work that emerged in the Americas was a mere adaptation of political ideas and strategies developed in Europe."31

The distancing process continues with a critical review of the management of power by traditional Stalinism, especially in the Soviet Union, once such power was established:

A serious problem for revolutionaries today stems from the fact that since the early part of this century Marxism-Leninism has been identified with the evolution of post-revolutionary society in the Soviet Union. The party and state structures that were implanted in the Soviet Union were generally viewed as the model for other revolutionary societies to follow. Given the problems that developed in the Soviet Union - Stalin's domination, and purges of the Soviet Communist party, the program of forced industrialization, the liquidation of the Kulak class - the close identity of Marxism-Leninism with the Soviet experience soon created tremendous ideological and political problems for revolutionary movements elsewhere. To this day the leaders of the capitalist countries use the Soviet experience to discredit Marxist revolutionary

31 Id. at 24.
movements.\footnote{Id. at 38.}

To broaden the credibility of their effort, the "neo-Stalinists" accept the "new challenge" of democratic reform now said to be offered by U.S. imperialism:

In this political and ideological battle a major tactic of the United States is the sponsoring of controlled democratic elections and the restructuring of governments to give them a reformist facade. Central America is the showcase for this project: there the United States is directly financing elections, bankrolling its favorite politicians (usually through the CIA), and placing US advisors in key government ministries in an effort to modernize the state bureaucracies....The left must meet this democratic challenge head on if it is to win the larger war against imperialism. Denouncing dictatorial governments and mounting guerrilla movements against them will no longer be sufficient. There will be few easy targets like Batista, Somoza, or Duvalier. In many parts of the third world the struggle will be fought over democracy, over whether the United States and its reformist allies - be they Duarte in El Salvador or Aquino in the Philippines - can contain the democratic aspirations of the masses and prevent revolutionary alternatives from developing. And the left, to meet this new challenge, will have to take up the democratic banner in a way that it has never done before.\footnote{Id. at 42-3.}

In a moment, I will examine the structure that these authors propose be put in place to win the "battle for democracy" while carrying out a "neo-Stalinist" revolution. But this perspective begins first with a new approach to analyzing the social structure of a potentially revolutionary society. It is out of this analysis that the proposal for a new structure will emerge.

Building on the independent work of Núñez, Fire In the Americas argues that today's revolutionaries must look beyond the narrow “class struggle” between workers and bosses in the economic arena. "The fundamental forces that drive capitalism today are still the same as those that Marx described in Das Kapital. But the social structures of capitalist societies and their state apparatus are significantly more complex than in the nineteenth century. Exploitation in both developed and underdeveloped capitalist societies has now reached the stage where it affects a wide array of social groups ranging from women and ethnic minorities to youth,
Christians, the elderly and the middle classes. In the underdeveloped countries, the rural-urban migration combined with the lack of employment opportunities creates an explosion of urban poor."

Beyond the traditional categories of worker and peasant, the authors describe a new "third force" within this new social complex that they believe is central to revolutionary change in the developing world. "To link political strategy and theory, it is necessary to locate the `motor' of the revolutionary process. In the advanced capitalist societies, it is the working class that embodies the basic contradictions between capital and labor. In most underdeveloped countries, however, it has often been the peasantry that constitutes the largest single social force....We believe that important transformations have occurred in most societies that make it imperative to expand this system of class alliances. While Marx and Lenin were both aware that other social sectors - especially factions of the petty bourgeoisie - could play a role in the revolutionary process, neither developed a program for their incorporation."

It is this incorporation of "petty bourgeois" sectors as a distinct element in the revolutionary movement that the authors see as critical. "History compels us to broaden revolutionary theory and practice. Diverse political experiences, ranging from the Cuban revolution and the political ferment in the United States in the 1960s, to the May 1968 rebellion in France, and the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, have made it increasingly clear that the impetus for revolutionary change no longer comes only from Marx's working class or Lenin's worker-peasant alliance. Today a third social force comprised of a variety of groups - the middle classes, the intellectuals, the urban poor, the petty bourgeoisie, and the ethnic and social movements - often plays a highly original role in social change....The ubiquity of exploitation, combined with new potentials for liberation, have been central in creating a third social force comprised of the middle class intellectuals, progressive Christians, and the social movements

34 Id. at 7.

35 Id. at 7.
(feminists, ethnic and minority movements, gays, etc.)...[T]hese groups sometimes have a
greater potential for sparking a revolutionary process than either the workers or the peasantry.
Today they are ripe for a new social vision, a vision that will liberate human nature." 36

The neo-Stalinists argue that a vanguard party is required to hold these three forces
together. It is the vanguard which can provide "direction and guidance", 37 they argue, noting that
"focusing on the masses and rejecting the need for a vanguard party" is "'tailist'" and
"revisionist." Such a position "ignore[s] the reality that the popular classes are almost inevitably
influenced, if not dominated, by the values of the established order." A revolutionary movement
requires "strong leadership....to deal with these mass attitudes....with backward ideas in the
movement." In addition, a vanguard is necessary to handle "internal social tensions within the
movement itself." These latter are all the more likely given the less coherent nature of the third
force in comparison with an organized working class or peasantry. 38

But in recognition of the inherently disparate nature of the third force, they argue for a
policy of tactical alliances between various fronts and coalitions, with members of the vanguard
fighting to take leadership roles in these movements. They criticize the "authoritarian structures"
found in "most socialist countries." Further, they point to the "verticalist and undemocratic"
practices of vanguard parties as "weaknesses" which must be "overcome." 39 They suggest that
the vanguard party be a "mass front in which the base has a role in deciding the direction and
program of the party." They argue for "political pluralism" within the vanguard itself, as well as
within the entire revolutionary movement.

But their discussion of these apparently democratic reforms of traditional Stalinist

36 Id. at 7-8.
37 Id. at 49.
38 Id. at 48.
39 Id. at 49.
organizational principles is laid out in only the most general terms. There is no discussion of the actual decision making process within such organizations. They note that Marx himself described the direct democratic control that the participants in the Paris Commune had over their leadership - including the right of recall, direct elections and the abolition of state functionaries - but they stop short of suggesting the implementation of such measures in their neo-Stalinist movement.

The Neo-Stalinist Apparatus of Power

In the exercise of power, there would appear to be very little to distinguish neo-Stalinism from its traditional parent. The strongest tendencies towards terror and repression are often absent, but the basic social structures are the same. A vanguard party is in command, perhaps modified by the neo-Stalinist definition of pluralism: consultation with, not control by, the mass base of the revolutionary movement. Using Nicaragua as an example, Núñez and Burbach note: "Today [1987] the positions of the Sandinista Front on national liberation, anti-imperialism, the mixed economy, political pluralism and non-alignment all reveal a broad ideological orientation. The revolutionary movement is multi-class, multi-ethnic, multi-doctrinal and politically pluralistic. And the party itself is not headed by a single strongman, but by a national directorate comprised of nine individuals who discuss the issues with broad input from the base before reaching agreements by consensus." 40

The process of "input from the base" was, of course, structured through the network of mass organizations, all open in their a priori declaration of loyalty to the vanguard party.

40 Id. at 53. Burbach has now distanced himself somewhat from the FSLN structure, instead pointing to the potential “new socialism” of figures like Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, who presumably has a more attractive means of exercising power. See Roger Burbach, A Bolivarian Socialist at the UN Hugo Chavez's Mission, COUNTERPUNCH, Sept. 24/25, 2005 (http://www.counterpunch.org/burbach09242005.html) (“a ‘democratic postmodern revolution’ is unfolding in Venezuela as hundreds of thousands of local organizations and movements are taking root among the multitude, enabling them to take control of their lives and their destinies”).
Burbach and Núñez note that the Frente Sandinista did not declare a dictatorship of the proletariat upon taking power "as previous revolutions have done"\(^{41}\) but, instead, broadened the revolution's "democratic content" by forming mass organizations which it then granted voting power on a national Council of State. This move, described above, took place in 1980. It gave the FSLN overwhelming control of this national interim governing body. In essence, it insured that the FSLN's nine person National Directorate ran the country directly, but with its broader, "pluralist" image intact.

In this development it might be argued there exists a shade of difference with traditional Stalinism. The lack of a Red Army to back them up, on the one hand, and the ever present pressure from the "democratic" colossus to the north, on the other, ensured some greater life in the Sandinista mass organizations than might otherwise have been found there. But the experience of other non-Red Army backed Stalinist regimes outside of the U.S. orbit indicate that such "life" is also occasionally present without ever placing centralized control in doubt. One thinks of the Yugoslavian self-management system, for example.

In fact, this "life" is essential if these organizations are not to atrophy, withering away and becoming the kind of empty bureaucratic machinery so widespread under traditional Stalinism. The aim in these cases is to overcome the fundamental failure of traditional Stalinism - that totalitarian tendencies mitigate, first, against providing central planners with the basic information they need for decision making and, second, undermine the generation of the motivational energy required by workers and lower level managers for carrying out the plan.

Burbach and Núñez see the system of participatory democracy as the key to maintaining vigor in these organizations. In their brief discussion of this system the authors lay bare, however, the totalitarian nature of even so-called democratic structures: "It is essential to recognize that democracy limited to the political party system is not democracy at all. It must instead permeate to all aspects of civil society. Democratic practices must prevail in union,

\(^{41}\) Id. at 56.
cultural and religious organizations (for believers and non-believers alike); in community activities, education and even international relations. The components of consultative and participatory democracy are well known in many socialist societies. They involve the formation and development of distinct mass organizations for the workers, the peasants, the teachers, youth, women, and so on. Participatory democracy also means that many of these organizations should have substantial responsibilities in the workplace: in the factory, the field, the office, and the school. Social and economic equality can only be achieved if the workers (broadly defined) play a role in running the economic and bureaucratic institutions that affect their lives.  

Thus, through the mass organizations the state bureaucracy and the party apparatus can map out their widespread intrusion into all aspects of the lives of their country's population.

Outside of the formal Sandinista orbit, the FSLN also attempted to establish a form of neo-Stalinist "pluralism." Rather than force opposition parties out of existence, common in some traditional Stalinist societies, these authors argue that the Sandinista experience demonstrates how their existence "provide[d] an escape valve for the more discontented elements, and simultaneously serve[d] as a political barometer for the revolutionary parties to make adjustments in their course if the non-revolutionary parties gain momentum."  

It is in this context that the neo-Stalinist profession of support for pluralism and elections must be understood. Because fundamental control of society is guaranteed by the vanguard's stranglehold on the security apparatus, key economic sectors and organizations, and its ideological dominance, it feels it can afford pluralism. In fact, pluralism can serve as a warning signal in case the vanguard has lost touch with the general population. After all, Burbach and Núñez write, "the bourgeois democracies, when they feel secure, have allowed the Marxist parties to compete in their elections, and there is no reason why nonrevolutionary parties should

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42 Id. at 59-60 (emphasis added).

43 Id. at 61.
be excluded in a vibrant and dynamic socialist society."\footnote{Id.}

Once again turning to Nicaragua as an example, they note that although initially some sectors of the FSLN saw the staging of national elections in 1984 "as a formal procedure that meant little for the development of the revolution" they soon saw tremendous advantages reaped from the process of mass mobilization that followed the outset of the campaign. "[A]n internal dynamic was set in motion," Burbach and Núñez write, "that compelled the entire Front to take the elections seriously and to expand the country's democratic processes. The mass organizations of the revolution, and particularly the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, launched a program of dialogue and internal education that significantly raised popular consciousness around political and economic issues. As a result, the Frente won a resounding victory in the midst of a counterrevolutionary war and a deteriorating economy. The elections demonstrated how a revolutionary government can \textit{solidify its hold on power}, not by adopting increasingly dictatorial measures, but by building mass democratic support."\footnote{Id. at 58 (emphasis added).}

This concludes our examination of the General Theory of Neo-Stalinism. It began with a recognition by its authors of a dual crisis in both the capitalist and Stalinist worlds. The former is suffering from a long-term social and economic decline, while the latter need only recover from certain political deformations. The widespread emergence of a demand for "democracy" is seen as a tremendous opportunity for a revival of "socialism," independent of its dubious heritage in the Eastern bloc. As an alternative to the traditional class struggle between workers and bosses, leading to a narrowly-built dictatorship of the proletariat, the neo-Stalinist analysis finds society divided into three key forces: workers, peasants and the all important third social force made up of disparate elements including the urban poor, intellectuals and those among the petty bourgeois disaffected by capitalism.

A new broad-based program of alliances and coalitions is proposed to pull these three
forces together. A vanguard party is required to lead this movement. Out of the mass fronts established on the road to power will grow the mass organizations, loyal to the vanguard, which will, upon the seizure of power, begin to exercise control of society through a system of participatory democracy. Given the secure hold the vanguard has on the state, political pluralism and even parliamentary-style elections are a possibility and may even have a distinct advantage for securing greater hegemony for the new regime. Underpinning this political system is a mixed economy that guarantees that the state controls the key areas of the country's wealth, while allowing limited markets and private ownership to supplement the bureaucratically-managed state enterprises.

Núñez' Third Force: A Key Proposition of the General Theory

As mentioned above, a central component of the General Theory of Neo-Stalinism is the premise that the societies that are potential locales for a neo-Stalinist revolution are not broken into the traditional categories of class conflict. There is neither simply the struggle between worker and boss, nor the tension between landowner and peasantry or rural proletariat. Instead, a new "third force" is considered central to socio-economic organization. The General Theory proposes that this new social class can, indeed must, play a central role in organizing a social revolution. The fundamental purpose of this analysis, developed by Orlando Núñez in a series of papers written soon after the FSLN took power in Nicaragua, is to justify a political strategy that displaces working class control of the revolutionary movement. Instead it suggests that the greater social complexity that today's revolutionaries face in the developing world requires delegating the management of the road to and consolidation of power to a vanguard party.

For Núñez, in fact, direct class struggle is not at the heart of political conflict. The great revolutions of the past, he argues, were between the generalized mass of "people" and the system itself; not between feudal lord and vassals, but between "the total people - liberated by the bourgeoisie" and "the previous feudal tyranny." In the same fashion, revolutionary wars in capitalist societies cannot be expressed simply as an armed struggle between the bourgeoisie and
the proletariat without also speaking of the "uprising of the total people (liberated by the proletarian project) against bourgeois and dictatorial domination."\(^{46}\)

It is "the people" whom the vanguard must organize to seize power. They do so through the establishment of a "proletarian project" but this is not to be confused with the traditional organizations of the working class - trade unions, social democratic, socialist or labor parties, etc. Instead, it is "proletarian ideology" which characterizes the political viewpoint of the vanguard. This must be argued for among the general population. This general mass was perhaps most cogently described by a predecessor to Núñez, Fidel Castro, to whom Núñez defers in his essays on this question:

> When we speak of the people we do not mean the comfortable ones, the conservative elements of the nation who welcome any regime of oppression, any dictatorship, any despotism, prostrating themselves before the master of the moment until they grind their foreheads into the ground. When we speak of struggle, the people means the vast unredeemed masses, to whom all make promises and whom all deceive; we mean the people who yearn for a better, more dignified and more just nation; who are moved by ancestral aspirations of justice, for they have suffered injustice and mockery, generation after generation; who long for great and wise changes in all aspects of their life; people, who, to attain these changes, are ready to give even the very last breath of their lives - when they believe in something or someone, especially when they believe in themselves.\(^{47}\)

Castro, Núñez notes, "goes on to list the sectors of ‘the people’ which are significant in the struggle: the rural dwellers who barely subsist with no land or work, those who are only seasonally employed, industrial workers whose struggles are continuously betrayed, teachers and


Núñez gives this general description a more precise definition:

What was true of Cuba in the 1950's, is true of many imperialized countries today. The third social force is politically significant and plays an important role in the revolutionary process. By third social force, I mean, those sectors that are neither capitalists nor productive wage workers, neither full time peasants nor permanently employed wage earners. In other words, the third social force is constituted primarily by the middle sectors in the towns and cities. Some may be more involved in direct production, others in providing services. Productive or unproductive, necessary or not, they are the sectors that are created by the process of capitalist development in our countries....The size of the third social force in imperialized countries increases daily with masses of proletarians being created who are not organically integrated into the centers of productive capital. They are forced, consequently, to eke out a meager existence on the margins of the sphere of circulation. This is the case in all those imperialized countries where commercial capital and the intermediary state dominate and reproduce capitalism through the creation of an enormous service sector."

I have emphasized Núñez's phrase "not organically integrated into the centers of production" because it describes, in Núñez's view, the fundamental characteristic that the members of the third force share. The third force lacks, he argues, its own means of social expression but has no lack of grievances, hence it makes for rich organizing material for a new political movement such as that developed by a vanguard party. Now it is clear why Núñez excludes the traditional classes from this new force. After all, full time industrial workers or the rural proletariat which finds year-round employment or the small landholder may share many of the same grievances as the third force, but they can and do turn more easily to their own organizational forms to raise whatever demands they may wish to express. Workers can form unions and political parties; peasants form cooperatives; rural workers organize land takeovers and unions.

But the members of the third force have no clear political perspective. They are open to a

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48 Orlando Núñez, The Third Social Force in National Liberation Movements, LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Spring, 1981 at 7. For a contemporary portrait of the massive potential size of such a Third Force, see MIKE DAVIS, PLANET OF SLUMS (Verso 2006).

49 Id. (emphasis added).
range of struggles that a vanguard party is free to exploit. This is not to say that the vanguard party will ignore the proletariat. But to the extent that it surmises, as was the case in Nicaragua, that the traditional proletariat (defined by them as regularly employed industrial workers) had alternative forms of political and economic organization, the FSLN chose to organize on other fronts. Their earliest recruits came from among students and intellectuals and later from the unemployed. Community or barrio struggles over general social issues (water, electricity, bus service, etc.) were often the locus of these efforts, rather than the shop floor. The moves made in the mid-1970s by one tendency of the Frente to organize workers were weak and of secondary importance to the leading strategy of the movement.

A close reading of Núñez, however, reveals an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, as we have noted here, Núñez argues for a non-proletarian base for the vanguard-led revolution. Yet, at the same time, this vanguard is said to be carrying out "a proletarian project." What is meant by this latter term? Is it consistent with Núñez's argument for a turn to the so-called "third force"?

For Núñez the displacement of the proletariat from a central position in the emergence of a revolutionary situation is paralleled by its displacement from the vanguard party itself. Hence, the party may be made up solely of elements from the "third force." In Núñez's words, "it was not the class background of the combatants that determined the class character of the revolutionary movement" in Nicaragua.\[50\] What is important in his view is the "proletarian character" of the revolution's politics. This does not mean simply handing power over to a proletariat, but, rather, the act of creating a genuine proletariat itself - seen by Núñez as the first step to the establishment of a modern industrial nation. What was, prior to the revolution, a tiny minority, should now become the majority - providing the revolution with a key building block for economic modernization.

"Even where the struggle for a transition to socialism starts as one principally against

\[50\] _Id._ at 238.
external forces," Núñez wrote, "it requires an internal process of proletarianization, not only of the working class but of society as a whole. Here the concept of proletarianization refers to the very creation of the working class as the historical subject of the revolution and the generation of the economic conditions needed for its development, a process that necessarily begins in the political sphere. I will argue that a proletarian project is indispensable for breaking with capitalism and building an alternative society. The main difference between revolutions in the developed and underdeveloped countries is that in the former, the revolutions can begin under conditions of advanced proletarianization, whereas in the latter the process of proletarianization is still one of the main ideological, political, social, and economic tasks."

This perspective reveals the fundamental raison d'être of the neo-Stalinist movement. It is not to elevate any particular social class to power from which this movement draws its motivation - not even the third force in the form in which it exists during the revolution. The purpose of this kind of revolution is socio-economic development managed from above - force feeding economic development in the manner of Stalin's collectivization drive or Mao's backyard steel mills. The rise to power of a new bureaucratic class emerges from an attempt to develop such a program. Solving the problem of development, in other words, creates the new class - the class does not appear apart from this question (implanted by the KGB, for example), and simply adopt "modernization from above" as its slogan for winning power.

But displacing the proletariat from the road to power does not create a contradiction for Núñez. "Who takes power?" Núñez asks. Here is his answer:

In the analysis of revolutions the nature of the class that takes power has often been confused. The general belief is that it is the dominated class (i.e., the proletariat) that becomes the new ruling class. But this is a dogmatic view of history. In general, class struggle in all known class systems does not result in the conquering of power by the previously dominated class but rather in the emergence of a third class, which held a secondary position in the previous system. This third class stands out as the class which plays the most revolutionary role after the break with the previous system.

51 Id. at 232.
It is "the revolution" which takes state power and "imposes itself on the immediate interests of the dominators and the dominated, and radically transforms them both." In sum, a small vanguard with "proletarian" consciousness can organize in a broad social milieu that can include traditional proletarians but is more likely made up of the disparate elements of the urban poor and disaffected intellectuals - the third force. Out of this organizing pool - a breeding ground for the new class, if you will - grows a movement for state power. It is in the process of taking power, of confronting the development question with a bureaucratic viewpoint, that a new security, administrative and ideological apparatus is built. This becomes the basis of a new social class, a new ruling class, which will, in turn, dramatically reorganize society to cause "the same transformations" which the developed nations of the world underwent during its agricultural and industrial revolutions.

This new class will hold state power and exercise it in a manner analogous to that of the capitalist state. "The state recognizes and develops the interests of a new revolutionary class - its social base - but more importantly it represents the interests of the project as a whole, even if this conflicts with the particular interests of the groups which constitute the revolutionary class it represents. This is how the capitalist state, the most developed of all forms of the state, operates....To want to make a political revolution only with the dominated class, or only around the interests of that class, is to lose historical perspective of the struggle." Like the earlier capitalist state, the "proletarian" state will carry out the construction of a new order. "Proletarianization means for us not only the objective process of collectivization," Núñez writes, "but also the spread of socialism to the rest of the population. Proletarianization is analogous to the bourgeoisification that occurred in an earlier era."

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52 Id. at 234-7.
53 Id. at 234-7.
54 Id. at 236, 237.
55 Id. at 235.
Thus, the working class and its independent democratic organizations, such as unions or political parties, are written off the historical stage by the theory of neo-Stalinism. In its place is a new proletariat whipped into place during economic modernization through the various organizational forms described by Núñez with Burbach in the General Theory.

Vilas on Nicaragua: A Special Application of the General Theory

It remains to apply this General Theory to the specific history of the Sandinista Revolution. There is a growing range of scholarship that attempts to analyze the history of the Nicaraguan Revolution from a viewpoint that is more or less sympathetic to what I have called here neo-Stalinist. Most of this work, however, is motivated out of that sympathy, not necessarily out of a conscious advocacy of a neo-Stalinist model. Furthermore this work tends to address specific questions, rather than the overall history of the revolution and the potential theoretical power embodied in that history. However, the Argentinean writer and FSLN advisor Carlos Vilas attempted a general synthesis of this history, using a perspective similar to that of the General Theory of Neo-Stalinism. His argument was first published in 1984 as *Perfiles de la Revolución Sandinista: Liberación nacional y transformaciones sociales en Centroamérica*. It appeared in English in 1986 as *The Sandinista Revolution: National Liberation and Social Transformation in Central America*. I will not review his entire argument here but, instead, pay particular attention to those aspects of it that influence FSLN policy towards the organized working class.

For Vilas a key step in the establishment of power by a national liberation movement is an accurate class analysis of the society to be "liberated." What social classes exist? How can they be organized on the road to power? How can they be managed or reshaped after taking power? He agrees with the argument in the General Theory that the traditional industrial proletariat is tiny in peripheral countries like Nicaragua and that this forced the emergence there
of a different approach to revolutionary organization. He is at one with Núñez when he notes that "the Nicaraguan people [are] a complex working mass of artisans, peasants, semi-proletarians, sellers, trades people, people without trades, day workers, students, the poor of the city and the countryside from whose center the proletariat is slowly becoming differentiated; the forge from which emerged the social subject of the Sandinista revolution and the popular insurrection."56

Together with Núñez he agrees that a revolutionary vanguard is central to leading this social mass. He refers to Núñez in noting that the vanguard party is like the "the figure of the executor [of a will], who takes care of the inheritance until the inheritor can exercise his rights by himself. The vanguard ‘will administer’ the interests of the proletariat class until the latter, having overcome its ideological backwardness, disorganization, and ‘mixture’ with nonproletarian elements of the labor force, can assume direction of the process." He notes that the same "image is also present in declarations of [FSLN] Comandante Henry Ruíz."57

Vilas confirmed that the FSLN avoided organizing within the existing trade union movement where the vanguard would have "had to confront the reticence or opposition to a strategy of revolutionary struggle among trade-union and political leaders of the traditional left and the Social Christian party."58 As the General Theory would have predicted, the FSLN turned to other locations for recruiting "proletarian" and "third force" elements. "In such conditions of manifest hostility, the approach of the FSLN to the workers, their recruitment into the revolutionary struggle, had to occur more in the barrios - which...appeared as an open camp for


57 Id. at 283. Ruiz, trained in Moscow and a key figure during the rise to power of the FSLN, remains an active leader of the left today in Nicaragua, but in a breakaway group from the original FSLN.

58 Id. at 118
Sandinista political work - than in the factories; more in the centers of reproduction than in those of production.\textsuperscript{59}

But once in power, the FSLN would emerge with its own trade union policy to make up for the lack of a pre-revolutionary base. Vilas noted that the FSLN not only encouraged unionization, "but also...a marked change in the conception of what a union is and must be." The implementation of such a view was not without conflict, given the non-FSLN organizations present in the existing unions and the traditional demands of the working class. "This change in the political focus of unionization - political in the sense that it is seen from the perspective of constituting a new social order - took place amid intense struggles within the workers' movement and the revolutionary camp, and made up part of the process of consolidation of Sandinista hegemony in this arena." Vilas describes the argument raised by the Frente in their trade union organizing. It is essentially identical to the views of Guevara on "revolutionary trade unionism": "In the view of the FSLN, unions are not merely trade-union organizations, but should articulate this activity with the advance of the revolutionary process in all its fronts, and should train the workers in progressively more complex forms of participation. In particular, immediately after the overthrow of the dictatorship, the FSLN demanded of the union movement an active contribution to recovery. To the Frente this implied not only an attentive watch on the business behavior of the bourgeoisie and its administrators, but also a strengthening of labor discipline and of the subordination of salary demands to those of reconstruction. This was a blow to the workers' expectations of rapid salary improvements and created a certain initial disorientation."\textsuperscript{60}

Vilas argued, "The FSLN generally gives the union the role of transmission belt between the workers and the administration of the enterprise." But he contended that although a tendency to reduce the unions to "a mere state apparatus...exist[ed] in some segments of the state and even

\textsuperscript{59} Id.

\textsuperscript{60} Id. at 179 (emphasis in original).
of the FSLN; they have been repeatedly denounced by the FSLN National Directorate."

Instead, Vilas noted that the active participation of the workers through the unions was considered a central component of raising productivity in the Nicaraguan economy. He described the careful delineation of union and worker activity considered legitimate within the revolutionary process.

Worker participation was encouraged through various committee structures set up at state-run factories and agricultural complexes or through trade union organizing efforts at privately owned facilities. Through worker assemblies and some joint labor-management committees, "the trade union is...assigned a function of revolutionary vigilance over the productive process....Worker participation...was fundamentally seen as effective fulfillment of the production goals, political vigilance, and collaboration with state organs in supervising the business conduct of the bourgeoisie and the APP [state property] administrators."

But this structure "did not yet imply incorporating the workers into the elaboration of basic decisions for the enterprises (investments, production goals, organization of the labor process, etc.)" In fact, the key role of these participatory efforts was identical to those laid out by Guevara - raise productivity and impose strict labor discipline. For the FSLN, too, economic productivity was linked to the loyalty of the workers to the revolutionary vanguard. As on FSLN planner noted, "a change in ownership forms is necessary but not sufficient to guarantee more profound transformation of the social economic structure; for that active participation of the workers is necessary in the political, ideological and, of course, economic life of the society."

Hence, the Frente argued that the unions and other mass organizations had the right to a

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61 Id. at 204.

62 Id. at 191 (emphasis in original).

63 Id.

64 M. Castillo, La participación de los trabajadores en la gestión de las empresas. (CONAPRO "Heroes y Martires" 1983) in Id. at 190
certain level of autonomy, but short of independent actions such as a strike. "The FSLN National Directorate thus outlined the existence of a relative autonomy between the state and the mass organizations," Vilas noted. Vilas cited the comments of Carlos Núñez (no relation to theorist Orlando Núñez), a member of the FLSN National Directorate until his death in 1990, who argued "that the mass organizations, framed within the general line of the revolution, have sufficient right, when these organisms [the offices of state officials] are closed, to recur to internal criticism, to public criticism, to use all means of communication up to mobilization to demand the necessary measures to guarantee that their claims be heard."\(^{65}\)

Note the limitations imposed: 1) such action had to be "within the general line of the revolution" - that is, the FSLN retained final say; 2) the organizations could go as far as "mobilization," presumably understood as a march or petition, but no adversarial action against the regime, such as a strike or the formation of independent organizations, was permitted; and 3) the FSLN only guarantees that "claims will be heard" not that the organizations could actually make independent decisions.

It came as no surprise to Vilas, therefore, when "toward the end of 1980 the FSLN began to emphasize the necessity of promoting union claims without interrupting the productive process, characterizing stoppages and strikes as a means of last resort."\(^{66}\) He noted the comments made by FSLN Comandante Tirado López to the First Assembly for Workers' Unity held in Managua on November 15, 1980: "[L]abor conflicts must be resolved without paralyzing production, because it is evident that now strikes not only damage the economy in general, but also the workers in particular. Around these points we must be clear: the salary and right to strike restrictions must be viewed as measures freely, voluntarily, and conscientiously adopted by the workers themselves owing to the situation the country is living through. It is a question of defending the economy by conscientiously assuming the sacrifices and the efforts that this

\(^{65}\) Id. at 184.

\(^{66}\) Id. at 185
implies.” Even the possibility of striking as a last resort was soon proscribed, justly in Vilas’ view. At the end of 1981, he noted, the regime calculated that labor stoppages had cost the country $150,000,000 in the first two years of the revolution - equal to 30% of Nicaragua’s exports. In Vilas’ words, such a move against strikes was "in accord with the necessities and possibilities of the current stage of the revolution.”

A key factor in the FSLN’s ability to establish hegemony within the labor movement was employment of the vanguard’s key dynamic in consolidating its power: the playing off of the proletariat and mass movement against the remaining private sector, and vice versa. This dynamic is one component of the road to power of a neo-Stalinist movement that is not made clear in the General Theory of Burbach and Núñez. As Vilas notes,

This process [of consolidating FSLN hegemony in the workers' movement] was closely tied to the development of the contradictions between the FSLN and the bourgeoisie, whose investment behavior was expected to be a strong impulse to economic revitalization. At the end of December 1979 members of this sector with important posts in the government were replaced in favor of a greater Sandinista cohesion of the revolutionary state. Only the engineer Alfonso Robelo and Mrs. Chamorro temporarily kept their positions in the government and the Frente acted to isolate Robelo from the bourgeoisie and neutralize the pressures coming from Washington. In this strategy, keeping workers' demands within certain limits, strengthening labor discipline, and the like, were essential to avoid excessively alarming the private entrepreneurs. The view of the FSLN toward the worker question seems to have resulted from the relation of forces between the revolution and the bourgeoisie, the limitations imposed by the productive apparatus, and the tensions that arose from the international arena, all framed within a process that defined the worker-peasant alliance as its fundamental base and aimed at profound social transformation.

But this dynamic is a dual-edged sword - useful to contain the mass movement as well as the private sector. "The government...knows the doubts and inhibitions of the private sector, its

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67 Id.
68 Id. at 189
69 Id. at 182.
internal differences and fears, and takes advantage of them: it combines denunciations, mobilizations, and the actions of the mass organizations with economic incentives, always offering a new opportunity, deferring, for the sake of national unity, the moment of rupture."\textsuperscript{70}

Hence, Vilas makes an additional contribution to our understanding of neo-Stalinism - describing the social balancing act that the new bureaucratic class undertakes to consolidate its state power.

**Conclusion**

With the writings of Carlos Vilas, the discussion of the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of the FSLN's trade union policy is complete. The policy of "Che" Guevara began this discussion. He introduced the concept of "revolutionary development" and the special role that labor unions and their leaders must play in implementing this kind of economic revolution from above. Building on the Cuban and Nicaraguan experience but also from a wider review of third world revolutionary movements, Burbach and Núñez described what I have called here a General Theory of Neo-Stalinism with a concise description of the basic outlook of vanguard parties and the methods they employ to gain and consolidate power. This theory pays particular attention to mass organizations and the system of participatory democracy, in which the pro-revolutionary trade unions play a central role.

Núñez himself provided an analytical framework within which such a revolutionary movement can develop. He replaced traditional class analysis, and with it the traditional centrality of worker-capitalist conflict, with a set of three forces. These include peasants, workers, and, most importantly, the new third force, made up of disparate elements among the urban poor, intellectuals and those in the petty bourgeoisie estranged from capitalism. Finally, Carlos Vilas examined the Nicaraguan revolution from the same perspective as that outlined by these writers and provided an explanation of important aspects of FSLN trade union policy. In the process he identified a central dynamic of the exercise of power by neo-Stalinism - the

\textsuperscript{70} *Id.* at 164.
triangular social struggle between the vanguard and its social milieu, made up of both the mass movement and the private sector.

Today, these ideas are alive again in the arguments of Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, in the pronouncements about “market socialism with Chinese characteristics” by the Chinese Communist Party or in the “21st century socialism” of Ecuador’s Rafael Correa. Each of these leaders or parties attempts to sustain their legitimacy and thus power by playing off the private sector against the working class. That triangle of forces remains a critical dynamic in the post cold war global economy. Thus, the ethereal image of “Che” now spreading around the globe should come as no surprise – he was a key protagonist of such a bureaucratic and authoritarian worldview. If not a surprise, however, his ubiquitous presence should sound an alarm bell among those who hope for an equitable and democratic alternative to the bureaucratic forms of power, both capitalist and “post-capitalist,” that are now taking hold around the world and that are having such a widespread influence on the hearts and minds of millions.