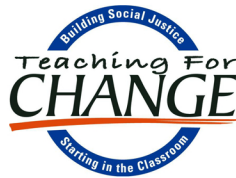


# Inside the Volcano: A Curriculum on Nicaragua

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## Role Play: Sandinista Dilemmas

*The performance of the Nicaraguan government in the years after the 1979 revolution has been controversial. For students to evaluate the arguments, pro and con, it's essential that the choices the new government made be examined in context. It's impossible to arrive at any reasoned conclusions about the Nicaraguan revolution unless students confront the limits and possibilities the revolutionaries, themselves, needed to confront. Through role play, this lesson puts students in the position of Sandinistas having just come to power in July of 1979. In discussion, students deal with the tough questions: land reform, worker rights, elections, foreign policy.*

*This lesson serves as a good introduction to post-1979 Nicaragua. For students to consider the issues thoughtfully and empathetically, it's important for them to have had some background on the Somoza dictatorship, economic and social conditions for the majority of Nicaraguans and on the history of U.S./Nicaraguan relations.*

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will understand some of the goals of and limits on the Sandinistas when they came to power.
2. Students will learn key political choices the Sandinistas made in the first months of the revolution.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #8-A: **Nicaragua: 1979**
- Handout #8-B: **Sandinista Policy Dilemmas**
- Teacher Background: Sandinista Policy Decisions

### Time Required

- Flexible, it depends on the decision making process of the particular class. Generally, several class periods are required.

### Procedure

1. Seat students in a large circle. (It is also an option to have students complete this activity in smaller groups, or even individually. We suggest the large group format to simulate more closely the decision making difficulties the Sandinistas would also have faced.)
2. Distribute Handout #8-A: **Nicaragua: 1979**. Have students read the role sheet. Discuss this persona to make sure they understand the social conditions facing them and the roles they're being asked to assume. You might

“interview” a few students in order to help them step into their roles. Some questions include:

- Who helped you win the revolution?
- In general, how do you feel about the wealthy classes? The poor?
- What kind of society would you like to create?
- What problems do you have?

### Sandinista Policy Decisions

#### 1. The National Guard

Directly after the insurrection, some 7,000-8,000 former National Guardsmen and civilian supporters of the dictatorship were taken into custody. This was considered necessary to prevent them from taking up arms against the government, to see that justice was carried out, and also to protect them from the people they had harmed.

They were then tried by special tribunals. About 4,300 were sentenced to jail terms; the rest were pardoned or their cases dismissed. The former Guardsmen could not receive more than 30 years in prison, because the new government established that as the maximum jail term and outlawed the death penalty.

As of 1989, only a handful (38) of these prisoners remain in jail. Some served their full jail terms, but many were released through a series of pardons issued by the government. Many were pardoned as part of Nicaragua's promises in the Central American peace accords first signed in August 1987. The 38 who remain in jail are considered to have committed "crimes against humanity."

#### 2. and 3. Land reform

The Nicaraguan land reform has changed substantially over the last ten years, in response to economic realities and popular demands. The Nicaraguan government initially turned Somoza's land, which covered 20% of arable land in the country, into state farms. A small part of this land was given to groups of peasants to farm coop-

eratively. The government chose this path because these were large, modern agro-export farms upon which the economy depended. The government believed that it would not be economically sound to break up these modern farms into small parcels which peasants would farm by old-fashioned methods.

But by 1981, peasants began to demand land, organizing marches and protests. To satisfy this demand, the government passed a relatively mild agrarian reform law which expropriated land held in farms over 875 acres which were abandoned or idle; the landowners would receive some compensation for their lands. While this satisfied the demand temporarily, once again by 1986 the government could not meet the demand for land. At that point the agrarian reform law was expanded to affect smaller farms as well which were not being efficiently farmed.

The land reform policy also changed in two dramatic ways. One, in order to meet the demand for land, and because some state farms weren't very profitable, much of the state land was turned over to the peasants (state land was reduced from a high of 24% in 1984 to 11.3% in 1989). Two, peasants now had a real choice in how they received their land. They could receive it individually or as part of a cooperative. Cooperatives themselves ranged from groups of individual farmers who simply shared a tractor or applied for bank credit together, to groups of peasants who owned and farmed their land collectively.

The cost of any real land reform is clear:

the government will lose the allegiance of some of the wealthier farmers and other economic elites. But the benefits are just as clear; in Nicaragua's case, 5,000,000 acres of land have been distributed to 120,000 peasant families.

Promotion of domestic crops. Somoza had concentrated primarily on profitable exports, so that this agricultural country had to import basic foods, leading to higher costs for consumers—particularly hard on the poorest sectors. The new government promoted planting of basic food crops as well as exports, so that cheap food would be available to the population. In the last few years, believing that the pendulum has swung too far and in response to the economic crisis, the government is encouraging more export production.

#### 4. Workers

The issue of workers' rights is particularly difficult. On the one hand, the government's stated objective is to improve the lot of workers and peasants. On the other hand, if the government were to respond to all the increased demands for higher wages (and these demands escalated after July 1979 as part of a "revolution of rising expectations,") the economy would get out of control and no one would be better off.

The Nicaraguan government outlawed strikes as part of the State of Emergency imposed at the height of the contra war. More often, though, it relied on appeals to workers to pull together in the national effort and make more limited demands. The strike ban has since been lifted.

Unable to give good wages in a tight economic situation, the government relied on "social wages": better free health care and education, stores which provided low-cost goods to workers, free day care, low-cost or build-your-own housing on free lots, ac-

cess to plots of land so rural workers could grow their own food. Some of these programs were scaled back, however, as the economic situation worsened.

#### 5. Elections

For the Sandinistas, democracy meant more than simply voting once every few years, it meant more people participating in the political life of the country. And a politically active population needed to know how to read and write. One of the first acts of the new government was to launch a massive countrywide literacy crusade. All through mid-1980, young *brigadistas* fanned out across the country to teach people basic literacy skills and to learn about peasant life in the countryside. [See Lesson #11, **Teacher Background Reading -- Education for A Change: A Report on the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade.**]

Nicaragua held its first free elections in November 1984, five years after the insurrection. The Nicaraguan government argued that it needed time to organize its institutions and educate its people before the first elections were held.

While a group of parties dropped out of the 1984 elections, stating that a proper "climate" did not exist in Nicaragua for elections, a total of seven parties ran and all received seats in the national legislature. Despite the lack of democratic tradition in Nicaragua and the fact that voting is voluntary, over 90% of the people registered to vote and over 75% voted.

The legislature then began the task of ensuring freer and fairer elections, by ratifying a Constitution made with broad popular participation and passing an electoral law. That law was further reformed to respond to opposition demands prior to the 1990 elections. There are some 10 parties or coalitions running in the 1990



## Sandinista Policy Dilemmas

Following are some of the dilemmas which confront you as the new leaders of Nicaragua. Discuss each one among yourselves, keeping in mind your goals, whose interests you represent and the pressures of the immediate situation. In your discussions of each issue, be sure to clarify the difference between what you'd like to do and what you are going to do given the pressures or limits under which you operate. Explain the reasons for your decisions.

1. **Ex-National Guardsmen.** Former members of Somoza's army are running loose throughout the country. A good number of these people are known torturers and murderers. Your supporters, many of whom suffered at their hands, are angry to see them go unpunished. Many of the Guardsmen are attempting to flee the country, while others are trying to blend into the population. **How will you deal with these people?**
2. **Somoza's land.** The Somoza family and associates owned 23% of the farmland. Now that they have left the country, it is in your hands.
  - A. **What will you do with this land? Some possible choices:**
    - **Turn it into large farms run by the government**
    - **Hand it over to individual peasants**
    - **Create cooperatives — large farms owned by groups of peasants**
    - **Devise some other plan**
  - B. **What kind of farming will you encourage?**
    - **Do you want people to plant crops that can be exported like coffee or cotton?** (Advantage: These crops bring in the dollars to buy things abroad. Disadvantage: They require complicated machinery and fertilizers that are very expensive.)
    - **Do you want people to plant food crops like corn and beans?** (Advantage: They can be produced using inexpensive traditional methods and will provide food for people to eat. Disadvantage: They are sold within Nicaragua and don't earn dollars for the country to import the medicines, machinery and other things it needs which it can't yet produce.)
  - C. **How will you get people to do the kind of farming you want?**
3. **Land reform.** There are other landowners with large farms. A few helped the Sandinistas during your struggle; most sat back and watched. Some have abandoned their land, refused to plant or "decapitalized" their property, burning fields, destroying machinery, driving cattle across the border to Honduras, letting equipment run down, etc. This means that their land is not producing enough to help feed people or earn money for Nicaragua.
  - A. **Will you take over any land other than that which belonged to Somoza?**
  - B. **If so, how will you decide whose land to take?**

- What are some of the important differences between Food First and the State Department when interpreting recent Nicaraguan history?
  - How would you decide whom to believe?
  - The State Department argues that the U.S. government is committed to “develop democratic governments in Central America.” Does the history of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua before the Sandinista revolution tend to support or discredit the State Department’s assertion? Explain.
  - How does Food First measure progress in Nicaragua? Is this a different way of measuring progress than that used by the State Department?
  - Both the State Department and Food First agree that Nicaragua has built up its army. What interpretations do the readings offer for the build up? Which of these do you agree with and why?
  - Based on the readings, would you say Nicaragua poses a military threat to the United States?
  - Food First asserts “it is impossible to be both for the hungry and against change.” What does that mean? Do you agree?
  - How do you account for why different people, presumably working with access to the same information, could come to such totally opposite conclusions?
3. Ask students to choose one of the readings to critique. Give them a number of options for how they might complete this assignment. For example, they could be editorial writers composing point/counter-point responses. This

would allow them to be passionate and biting in their criticisms. As an alternative they might choose to write parodies of one of the readings. They could write speeches to be delivered at a rally, compose leaflets refuting the major points of either of the readings or draw on the dialogue poem model introduced in Lesson #6. The goal is simply to give students as free a hand as possible in evaluating and responding to the arguments raised in either of the readings.

4. After students have finished their critiques, give them the opportunity to share these with one another. Encourage student response.

