

June 1, 1984

Dear CONAS Colleague:

We are current and former CONAS activists who support the goal of self-determination for all peoples. Yet we are deeply perturbed by the article in the current Guid Notes which purports to set forth "the CONAS position" on the Nicaraguan government's relations with Miskito Indians and other native peoples.

We understand that the article and the accompanying one by the Central American Task Force (CATF) are statements of positions to be debated at the Portland NEB, and that Bell, Ryan and Roberge have proposed a resolution along the lines of their article. We have serious reservations about both the content of their position and its description as "the CONAS position."

There has been no national decisionmaking process whereby CONAS adopted this position. Organizationally, it is nothing more than the individual views of its authors. From conversations with other CONAS people, we conclude that it is distinctly a minority position within CONAS.

Turning to content, we note that there are factual disputes between the authors of the two articles. As one example, Bell, et al., claim that the Miskitos had no involvement in the drafting of the 1981 Declaration, while CATF claims that the declaration "was drawn up by Miskito, Sumo, Rama and Creole people and adopted word for word by the Nicaraguan government." Certainly, important factual disputes should be resolved before CONAS, much less the entire NLG, takes a position.

Perhaps more important, the authors' position essentially is an abstract one that ignores the reality of Nicaragua's situation. It accuses the FSLN of violating rights of self-determination by failing to permit a national minority to secede and redraw its own national boundaries--something that has not yet been permitted by any regime, even the most progressive. By focussing on this one point, the authors fail adequately to acknowledge the accomplishments of the Nicaraguan government with respect to its native people, achieved when its very existence has been at issue. Its concrete achievements in public health and housing, vaccination programs, literacy campaigns in native tongues, and so forth, are exemplary.

The Nicaraguan government has a more supportive and amicable relationship with its native people than Brazil, Guatemala, the U.S., or, indeed, most governments. It treats them as well as it does any of its citizens. Under these circumstances, immediate self-determination is of lower priority than in other nations where outright genocide is the practice.

The article by Bell, et al., is conspicuously silent about the Miskito right to self-determination in neighboring Honduras, although Miskito lands lie in both nations and Honduras lacks the progressive policies of Nicaragua. In fact, but for U.S. intervention, native peoples' prospects for continued existence as

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well as self-determination would be brighter in Nicaragua than virtually anywhere on the globe.

Finally, there are serious questions about the practical effect of making an issue of native self-determination in Nicaragua at this time. Nicaragua is fighting for its life and for the right of self-determination of all its people at this very moment. Miskito villages are under attack by contras, who are murdering people, attempting to destroy the economic base of the Miskito community, and literally kidnapping people to add to the contra ranks. There can be little doubt that a critical statement by CONAS or the Guild would be used by the contras, the CIA, and other enemies of the Sandinistas.

Even if a magic wand could be waved to produce an independent Miskito nation of 70,000 in Nicaragua, is there any question that the U.S.--given what it has done in Honduras with its millions of people--would soon corrupt the new nation, turn it into a U.S. military base, and force it into the war against Nicaragua?

We are in favor of having an internal discussion of this topic at the Portland NEB, but think this is not the time to take a public position on the Miskito right to self-determination. CONAS has a meeting scheduled for that Friday morning, June 22, from 9:00-12:00. There we will ask CONAS to decide both that it does not endorse the views expressed in the Guild Notes article and that it will not propose the resolution that has been submitted in its name.

If you feel as we do, we urge you to attend the NEB and express your views. If you're unable to be there, we would be pleased to present a letter stating your views.* At the very least, let others who are planning to attend know what you think.

In Struggle,

Bruce Ellison, Rapid City, S.D.
Sasha Harmon, Seattle, Wash.
Toby Hollander, St. Louis, Mo.
Philip Katzen, Seattle, Wash.
James Leach, Rapid City, S.D.
Jennie Rhine, Occidental, Calif.
Melinda Rorick, Washington, D.C.
Carol Strickman, Oakland, Calif.
Norton Tooby, Oakland, Calif.

P.S. We have circulated this letter to those indicated. Please share it with any CONAS people we have missed. Many thanks.

cc: Barbara Dudley, President, National Lawyers Guild.

* Send to Norton Tooby, East Oakland Community Law Office, 1411 Fruitvale Ave., Oakland, CA 94601.