tunity to do so. A small town of bullet-riddled buildings nestled among brown hills north of Managua, Esteli has always been a center of Sandinista strength. The people are proud of the part they played in the armed struggle against Somoza and the town's resistence cost it dearly.

There were two cigar factories, one privately owned and the other confiscated from the Somoza family. We were encouraged to visit the state factory by a young American whose pro-Sandinista fervor bordered on the weird -- I hadn't met a self-parodying leftist since the early seventies. The second day of our visit we walked to the outskirts of town, approached a gun-toting uniformed woman -- assigned to guard against attack by contras -- and asked permission to visit the plant. Soon we were walking around the premises with a smiling young man who described himself as a statistician who worked in the administration of the factory. I'll call our guide Alberto for this account.

We left the reception area and entered a room in which women and a few youngsters were seated at tables grading tobacco. Next was a large factory "floor" where men and a few boys were rolling graded leaves into cigars. Alberto talked some about himself. He'd started as a roller and would have remained if things hadn't changed with the revolution. Since 1979 he had been able to go to school and move into his current job in management. We began to shoot questions at him. He never got ruffled. He seemed very patient, sincere, intelligent. Though he didn't give the impression of being an experienced propagandist, none of us asked him a key question: was he a member of the FSLN?

He explained that education was encouraged for all; every day illiterate workers could take off a few hours to be tutored by their literate *compañeros*. All workers involved in this process continued to receive regular pay. Since they were paid by a modified piecework plan (minimum pay with a bonus for greater production) it is hard to tell what "regular" pay would be and to what extent participation in the literacy drive could be accounted for by altruism, coercion or monetary reward.

I asked about the plant manager we had met briefly. He too had always been a worker at the factory; if a lot of rollers were out sick he would come on the floor to roll cigars. The management came from the ranks of the workers. (Were they paid differently? How much? More unasked/unanswered questions.) Personnel decisions were made by the manager (FSLN?) and the union representative (FSLN?) who was elected by the workers in an annual vote (did the vote assure actual rotation, or was it a merely cosmetic rotation of party cronies?) The current union rep was a woman, something unhear of in Somoza years.

There was a division of labor by sex which Alberto said was being rectified by the women themselves. I didn't see any task rotation -- apparently attrition assured this. Women graded or finished leaves and cigars and packed boxes, while men cut or rolled leaves and did heavier work. New workers of both sexes, mainly teenagers, were seen in all areas.

Asked about factory ownership, our guide instantly replied, "We own it." The quiet way he said it took my breath away (nothing of the manner if the weird young American). He added that the state owned it -- nominally -- but that all the workers felt it was theirs (would we have gotten the same answer from another worker?). The profit, after taxes, was disposed of by the workers. First, they gave themselves one month of paid vacation a year. Then they built a kitchen and lunchroom and subsidized their lunches. They had improved the lighting, ventilation and other working conditions. They instituted the literacy program and facilitated continuing education for workers who wanted it. The plans for 1985 included constructing and staffing an on-site day care center.

I must admit to excitement. Alberto's matter-of-fact account of personal and collective empowerment was beginning to affect all of us in the band of renegade brigadistas. His delivery was not slick or studied -- he just told us how cigars were manufactured and, almost incidentally, how people took control of their

workplace and lives (we might ask if it's the kind of control that will last). He didn't mention Marx or Lenin once; he didn't seem to care about anything but cigars and how his co-workers were transforming their immediate situation.

He seemed almost embarassed when describing the problems caused by the U.S. embargo against Nicaragua. The U.S. had accounted for 99% of the factory's sales. Now that income from the States had dried up, new markets were being sought elsewhere. Alberto seemed genuinely bemused that we could suffer a government hell-bent on undoing everything he and his *compañeros* had done for themselves. With a generosity of spirit that endears them to most visitors from the North, Nicaraguans chalk up the appalling behavior of our government to the equally appalling ignorance of the American people. We're not bad, just dumb. With a shiny new state that actually seems to deliver "democracy" and "social justice" (in comparison with Somoza what state wouldn't?), Nicaraguans also tend to ascribe supernatural powers to their government and a somewhat magical relationship between The People and The State.

In the packign area we spied posters of Marx and the Pope, staring at each other across the wall. This startling juxtaposition was further evidence of the cozy relationship between the Church and the revolution in Nicaragua, despite U.S. media coverage to the contrary. The people, who are intensely religious, had no quarrel (in February 1984) with the "revolutionary process" in general. The real quarrel was between some people in wealthy parishes -- along with their pastors and bishops -- the the FSLN. The upscale elements have reason to complain -- it's harder to fly to Miami or Houston to go shopping and the workers are getting *extremely* uppity, etc., etc. -- but poor people and their priests don't share these concerns. My personal view is that traditional Christianity and Marxist-Leninism are so flawed by patriarchal/hierarchical thinking that they are perfect bedfellows. In a sense, they deserve each other. I'm surprised it took until the 20th century for liberation theology to manifest itself in the real world.

Marx and Jesus notwithstanding, I came away from the factory in a fog of respect and love for Alberto and, vicariously, the other workers. Forgeting the unasked /unanswered questions, we all allowed ourselves to be overwhelmed by the catalog of admittedly real changes for the better in the immediate material lives of the workers. That there seemed to be some degree of worker input seemed like icing on the cake. How far from

our cherished beliefs that self-management IS the cake! At any rate, it was a pretext for me to launch into a treatise on the anarchist collectives of Spain, and then we all started babbling about self-management, sexism, vanguardism, etc., etc. We all posed as mock Fidelistas outside the gates, huge cigars jutting from our mouths at all angles, laughing and joking as cameras clicked. I exclaimed, "The FSLN can go screw itself, but why can't the U.S.A. just LEAVE THESE PEOPLE ALONE?!" For the first time in Nicaragua I felt true solidarity with the people.

It was as I left the factory that I decided to vote against Reagan, whether I was an anarchist or not. And to commit myself to getting the U.S. out of Central America. My concern has grown more urgent as the year has passed. I found the (A) antibody in Nicaragua, even in those who describe themselves as Sandinistas

Continued on page 12