

# ATC ESTELÍ: THREE TIMES HEROIC

A Friends of the ATC Publication  
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# ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION...

This publication is a part of a testimonies project produced by the Friends of the ATC, a solidarity network with the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC, or Rural Workers Association). Founded in the context of the Sandinista Revolution, the ATC is an organization of struggle that defends the rural workers and peoples of Nicaragua. We organize at local and international levels to spread awareness, form solidarity, and facilitate support for the struggles and initiatives of the ATC and the international movement La Vía Campesina. In the spirit of internationalism, we believe in the necessity of supporting ongoing struggles for justice in our own communities and around the world.

Our main activities are the following:

Sharing information and news about the ATC, the CLOC, and La Vía Campesina

Organization of events (exchanges, delegations, and speaking tours)

Logistical support for relationships between the ATC and other organizations and individuals around the world

Securing resources for initiatives of the ATC, CLOC, and La Vía Campesina

From July 11–21, 2019, the Friends of the ATC and the ATC hosted their “Solidarity with Nicaragua” delegation. A central purpose of this trip was the collection of testimonies in order to clarify for international audiences and solidarity activists the current state of revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua. Over the course of our time in Nicaragua, delegates conducted more than 20 interviews with ATC organizers, students, and members, whom described today’s political situation in Nicaragua as well as efforts to build agroecology, food sovereignty, socialism, and anti-imperialism in the region. These testimonies have been transcribed, translated, and condensed by Friends of the ATC and will be released in a series of packets like this one.

If you have any questions or want to become involved in the work of the Friends of the ATC, please write us: erikatakeo.atc@gmail.com (English, Español). You can also visit our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/friendsatc>) or our website (<https://friendsatc.org/>).

We thank WhyHunger for their collaboration on the design of this document.



# Introduction

Born in 1978 within the context of the Sandinista Popular Revolution, the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo is an organization of struggle that represents more than 50,000 workers in unions and cooperatives. Active in 13 of the country's 15 departments (Nicaragua's equivalent of states), the ATC organizes at the departmental level in federations. This structure allows for the ATC in each federation to respond to the similar but unique realities of rural people in the different agricultural regions of Nicaragua. The testimonies in this packet give a glimpse into how one such federation — ATC-Estelí — advocates for workers and cooperative members in Nicaragua's substantial tobacco and cigar-making industry. By capturing the organizing taking place in one department, these interviews with four leaders of ATC-Estelí illuminate the work of the ATC overall.

Estelí, located in the mountainous northwest of Nicaragua, is home to both the production of tobacco leaves and the manufacture of cigars. The department has over 60 world-class cigar factories whose owners profit greatly from US and European markets. Employing over 30,000 workers, the industry is rife with both abuse and resistance. For this reason, ATC-Estelí organizes and trains about 2,500 workers to defend their rights and negotiates with cigar companies to improve working conditions. The role of ATC-Estelí, however, extends beyond organizing unions. As these testimonies detail, a landmark achievement of ATC-Estelí was the opening in 2014 of the School of Tobacco where youth can go to learn the trade of rolling cigars in free month-long courses. Graduates receive a certification of competency registered through the government, which has helped thousands of workers (many young, single mothers) obtain employment in Estelí. Finally, these leaders also describe ATC-Estelí's promotion of small-farmer cooperatives, a mission shared with other ATC federations across Nicaragua.

Beyond their roles with the ATC and the goals of their organization, the leaders of ATC-Estelí discuss growing up in the countryside, how the ATC is intrinsically connected to

Sandinismo, and the effects of the failed coup specifically in their city. Historically, the department of Estelí has been pivotal in the liberation of Nicaragua and the defense of its sovereignty, from General Augusto Sandino's original uprising and the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship to the defeat of the 2018 attempted coup. The city of Estelí, the departmental capital, is known as "three times heroic" for having kicked out the Somoza National Guard three times during the insurrection in the lead-up to the Triumph of the Sandinista Revolution. Having organized long-term battles for land in Estelí, the ATC itself belongs to these stories and continues to defend certain worker-controlled farms that were founded through the agrarian reform of the 1980s.

ATC-Estelí is dear to the hearts of many Friends of the ATC as over the past few years the federation has hosted delegations, interns, and other international visitors. By visiting communities like La Montañita, Friends of the ATC have been able to experience rural Nicaraguan life and see the tangible benefits in the countryside of the Sandinista Popular Revolution and the ATC. We wish that this publication captures the perspectives that so many of us have been lucky to gain first-hand thanks to our friends and comrades in Estelí.



# Reina Muñoz

General Secretary, ATC Estelí



# I am Reina Muñoz...

I am the General Secretary of the ATC here in the department of Estelí. We are a federation of men and women organized in unions, in cooperatives, in commissions, and county committees. We have more than 2,500 members, and reach more than 30,000 workers in the tobacco sector (the main agricultural sector) in Estelí.

As a tobacco worker, I watched how labor rights were violated and I liked learning how to help defend other people that maybe because they were shy, or because they didn't complain, were taken advantage of.

Ever since I was young, I liked being a part of this organization, being here in the ATC, to be able to help others. Because from these spaces, we are the bridge that is able to help people get where they need to go.

The ATC is 41 years old. It is an organization that encompasses many people without distinction of race, religion, or politics. It is a very broad organization where we all fit in, where each one of us, men and women, work for ourselves in order to improve our living conditions. We



Tobacco worker carrying leaves in to be cured in drying houses at San Nicolas farm, Estelí

in municipalities. The idea is that the organization never dies, but that it continues, continues to strengthen with each one of its comrades in their different spaces.

It is a struggle that we have been working on, within the Revolution, and it is the Revolution that has taught us. The Revolution has taught us many things: to defend ourselves, it has taught us how to dialogue between comrades, it has taught us how to survive. I believe that more than ever, we are struggling so that the Revolution, too, can be heard at a world level, at the level of all peoples, that our struggle is just. We have come out of the darkness. We have seen light, from the moment that we fought and won we saw light, and it is important that others know that the Revolution and the ATC are the same. The Revolution and the ATC are the same. We must not forget.

I believe that we must follow this path and continue to teach our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren, our nephews, brothers, the family, the nuclear family that only by fighting for our rights can we achieve an improved standard of living. We achieved peace, we achieved reconciliation. In our nation, we have lived through many events, but together we will move forward.

**“The Revolution and the ATC are the same. We must not forget.”**

have our main ideas, we have our banners of struggle: to improve the standard of living of workers and peasants.

The ATC is an organization that has been a part of daily struggles as well as the Revolution. It is a revolutionary organization. It was born out of the Revolution. So, as the revolutionaries that we are, we are also following it up where all our leaders are integrated in different organizations, whether in urban neighborhoods, in rural communities, or



# UPBRINGING & INTRODUCTION TO THE ATC

My family is from the northern part of Nicaragua, but they moved to the capital (Managua). I was born in the capital, but there was the earthquake in 1972, so we moved to Estelí. My family is a very humble family, as well as religious. They taught me that we should follow the right path. Since I was a child, I've been acquiring this knowledge in both spiritual and social life.

I grew up with that and at an early age I worked. Until I was 14, I had only finished first grade. But then I started studying at night — I worked and studied at night. Since I was the oldest in the family, I worked and helped my family, my siblings. So I couldn't go on studying. I helped at home on the economic side. At 22, I had my first daughter, another responsibility, so I had to work. So I stopped studying altogether.

I started working in tobacco when I was 23, as a tobacco worker. There I began to see the union organizing and began to see life differently, not as it was when I was 14, 15, 16 years old. At that time, they asked me, "Do you want to be a member of the ATC?" I said, "Yes, I would." I became General Secretary of the union and started to organize union members. I also became member of a tobacco cooperative. So that's how I began working with the ATC, where I continue today.

I'm a councilwoman. I have a position in the party. I believe that I have the capacity to speak with many people and in this peace process that we have I have also spoken with many people. I am a woman who has been fulfilling my goals that I have proposed.

## DAILY WORK OF THE ATC

What are we doing here in our organization every day? We are in communication with our unions, fulfilling the tasks that the unions themselves demand. For example, trainings, talks, meetings. We have executive meetings where we plan each one of our tasks, at what moment it is going to be fulfilled, the work that has to be done from house to house, looking for the members. We review to see if each member is still enthusiastic about the union



and if they aren't, then we do consciousness-raising to see how he or she can help us within the union or within the company. With our associates in cooperatives, our task is to give them the knowledge of the laws, what are their duties, what are their rights. We also have consultancies. We advise each one of the comrades whether they are trade unionists, cooperative members, and also non-members who come and seek our help.

We also advise women who suffer violence, whether in their family, at work, wherever. We are the channel or bridge to get that person where they need to go to have their problem solved. For example, we have had cases of women who have been raped by their husbands, who have been psychologically abused. We don't have a psychologist. What we have are lawyers. So what we do is coordinate with other organizations. For example, we coordinate with the "Fundación Entre Mujeres," which has a psychologist, and there we take our women who have these problems. We also coordinate with the Ministry of Health, for example, to provide proper health examinations for women. And we have had good results, results that satisfy both the organization and women. I'm happy that we are able to help other women.



# SOCIAL PROGRAMS & THE FSLN GOVERNMENT

At this stage of the Revolution, we have achieved many things. For example, all the social benefits that our government has given, both to workers and to peasants, like the Zero Usury loans. A woman who works in tobacco says, "I'm going to take a loan to sell clothes, to sell cosmetics, or to sell coffee and bread." It pleases us that this woman, in addition to her workday, has another source of income. How does she do it? She has time because in the company, our labor code allows an eight hour workday, and she has to comply with those eight hours in the factory or union.

The Plan Techo (Plan Roof) is a social project that the government gives to workers, as well as to people who are not workers. It's a much better thing because maybe a worker has a little house that's getting wet, the rain gets in, or a drop in the bed where she sleeps, and getting a Plan Techo is a big achievement.

Our government has been making a lot of progress. All the improvements, the streets, electricity, water in areas where it never was before. For example, this afternoon we have an inauguration of some streets in a neighborhood. It's not just the worker who passes through there, not only the peasant, but also children, women, the people who live in that neighborhood, those who don't live there. Electricity is for everyone, water is for everyone. So our government is not looking at if you're Liberal, if you're Sandinista, what it wants is to help the people. That's how we're working and our organization is a part of the social work that is being done.



Baking in a traditional oven in La Montaña





La Montaña community members make rosquillas, a Nicaragua corn-based cookie

## THE 2018 COUP ATTEMPT

Estelí is a historic city, three times heroic because we had three wars, plus the one that happened in 2018. Here was where almost everything began; well, it started in Leon, but Estelí followed. So, we feel that last year, yes, it was a very, very sad year, because we had deaths again. We had wounded people again and that, as it were, revived the old war.

The coup attempt started at a time when the ATC was also going to celebrate International Workers' Day on May 1st. We were going to have a grand celebration, but the opposition beat us to it on April 19. Here in Estelí they put on their famous marches, but they were not peaceful marches. They were terrifying! Terrifying marches. We never thought that such ugly things were going to happen.

As an organization, we were afraid that they would come and burn our office because this was an oppositional area, the opposition initiated a lot of violence in this area. We felt

that fear because we are very well known as the ATC, very recognized, and they know that. The opposition knows that the ATC is Sandinista and that those of us who work here are Sandinistas. It was a very difficult time, but we didn't close. We stayed, our offices were always open, always with caution, to see who we were receiving so that we could also give advice.

We toured, too, to see who was working and who wasn't. Some factories worked, but most didn't. We were there too, cautiously in the unions; we didn't know who we were counting on because it was a very tense moment. We started talking to our general secretaries. We know our general secretaries, so we could ask how each company was. That is how we kept in constant communication with our members. And last year (2018), we celebrated July 19th (the anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution), here in Estelí. It was very big, everyone participated. As it was a holiday, the workers went to celebrate too.

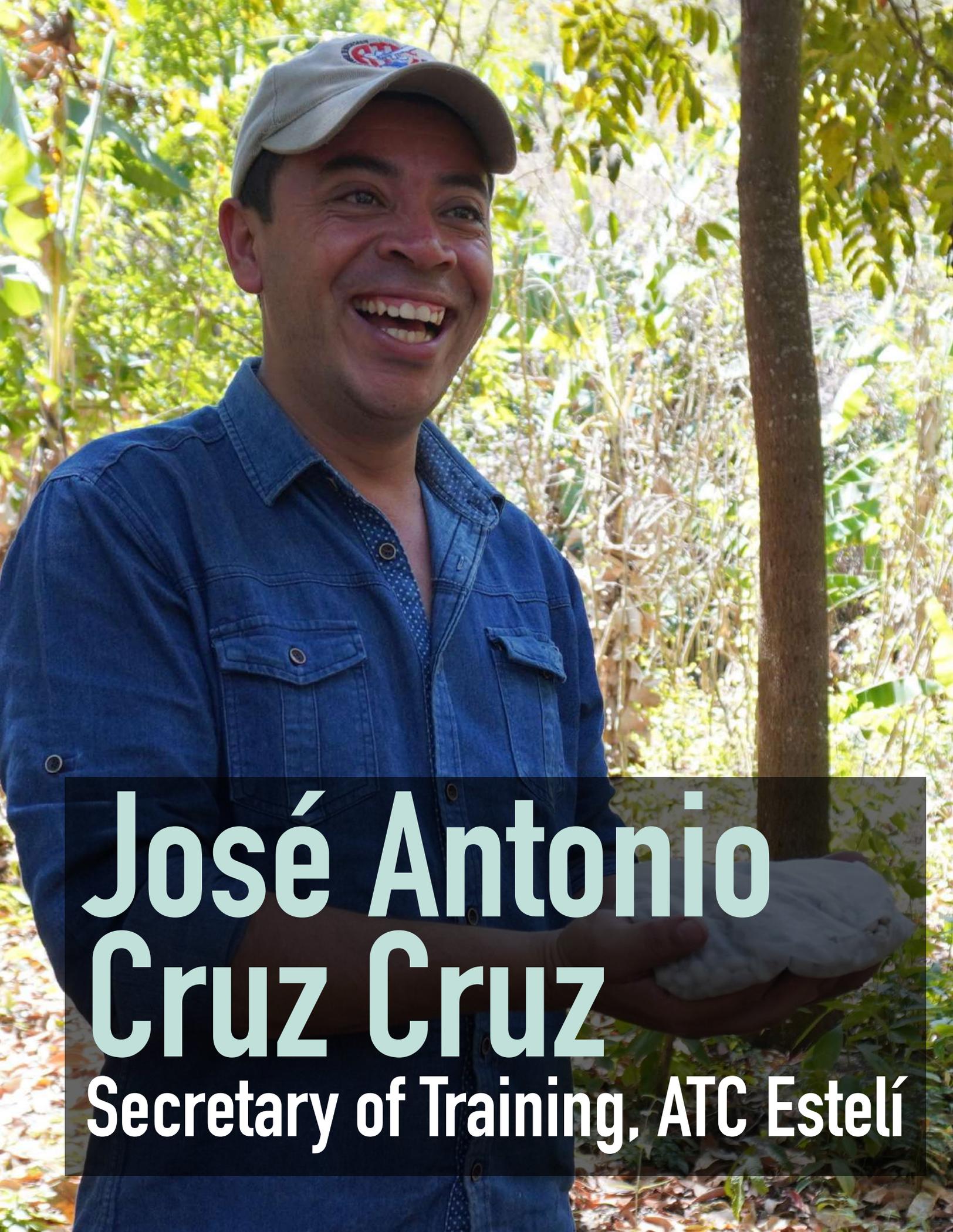


# RECONCILIATION AFTER THE COUP ATTEMPT

If the opposition calls the ATC, then we are going to talk to them, as we would if the FSLN calls them, as we would if the FSLN calls. Things here are understood by talking, with communication, and with knowledge of the cause. As the ATC, we can't answer either side poorly. What we want is for the ATC to be a peace organization. It is an organization that has been working with different people. So we also want to know what they say.

For me the ATC has always been an ideological organization, disciplined, active, and with a lot of communication. In these words, I share with you about the work of the ATC. We are part of the Justice and Peace Commission. We have to talk to our comrades and to those who are not. We have to discuss that we want peace in Nicaragua, that what we want is to work, that we no longer want bloodshed.





# José Antonio Cruz Cruz

Secretary of Training, ATC Estelí

# I am José Antonio Cruz Cruz...

I live in the community La Montañita, here in the municipality of Estelí. I have been here in the organization for more than 10 years. During these ten years I've worked in different areas. First I was secretary of the Rural Youth Movement in the ATC. Then I was the promoter of the tobacco school, through the Francisco Morazán Peasant Worker School, and currently I am serving as the secretary of training here in the organization in the department.

I come from a peasant family, from humble conditions, like most of us who work here in the ATC. We come from the countryside. When the ATC began to work promoting the agrarian reform, adult literacy and other programs jointly with the government — as the ATC was born within the Revolution — my grandfather, whose name is Marcelino Cruz, was the leader of the community. He was the first reference of the ATC in La Montañita.

First, my grandfather was there as a leader, then my father followed, and now I continue to work with the organization. I started working with the young people. The organization has always offered the space to work with young people. I had finished my primary studies but due to a lack of resources I could not go to university. At that time, the ATC had the applied agricultural administration program in Santa Emilia, Matagalpa and I was introduced to the program. I liked it because it was something that was similar to the experience I had with the countryside, agriculture, livestock. So, I decided to go study in this program and it was the first link, the first contact, that I had with the organization. Later, in 2007, I was promoted to

work here with the youth in the department of Estelí. After all these processes and after living through the Revolution but also the whole process of counterrevolution — the 16 years of neoliberalism — the organization has always maintained its banner of struggle: working with workers and peasants. In the case of our territory, initially the work was more with small farmers, organizing them in cooperatives and associations of producers, developing projects to rescue native seeds through participatory plant breeding and also promoting the issue of food sovereignty.

## ATC TRAINING PROCESSES & THE FRANCISCO MORAZÁN SCHOOL

The organization has always had a training program — both in organizing, in technical training, and in unions. When I came to the organization, the focus was technical training. But, along with technical training, they also talked to us about the subject of what the organization was working on: the topics of food sovereignty, health, food security, labor rights, cooperativism. Those topics were of interest to us because they are in line with our reality and our needs as peasants. We replicated these themes to young people and had a good time participating in the whole training process of the Peasant Worker School through CLOC-Via Campesina.



The Francisco Morazán School is the technical training school of the ATC in Nicaragua. The school has promoted courses focused on trade, looking for opportunities for unemployed youth, on every topic of entrepreneurship. The school has developed training processes for cooperativism, unionism, labor rights, issues related to violence against women, masculinity, food sovereignty, agrarian reform. The organization works on a variety of issues, and all of them are also linked to the issues that CLOC- Via Campesina works on because the Francisco Morazán School is like the training school for the organization here in Nicaragua and it is the regional school of CLOC-Via Campesina. Compañeros and compañeras of organizations from Central America and Latin America come here to be trained. In that sense, it's very nice because one has the opportunity to exchange with the big family of the ATC at a national level but also the big family of CLOC-Via Campesina in Central and Latin America. We could say that being in the Peasant Worker School is a process of exchanges, of learning, because one becomes familiar with the struggle in different countries in the region; their advances, their achievements, the things that are working well for them, and obviously we share how we are working. So that generates a very rich exchange, in addition to building friendships and very beautiful relationships.

## YOUTH PROCESSES & THE ATC

The focus of the organization is always to organize the youth based on their own needs — in terms of training but also in terms of recreation, in terms of education. Therefore, the organization seeks to develop these topics: political advocacy, youth leadership, sexual and reproductive health, among others. But of course we never neglect the part of their labor rights, the part of organizing unions, consciousness-raising, all through the ATC. As the saying goes: “The right that is not defended is the right that is lost.”

In the case of young people from the countryside, we address quite a few productive topics that interest them. For example, if they say, “We want to form a sports team,” we try to coordinate with them and search for resources but also involve them so that they know that together things can be achieved. We form leagues or sports tournaments. In the same way, the organization has cultural spaces. For example, for the young people who like to sing, dance,

or do theater, the organization offers that space. In the assemblies, in the workshops that we always develop, we have the open space for them to participate.



Political training course in the Francisco Morazán School

“The right that is not defended, is the right that is lost.”

Also with the educational side, if we know that they are interested in studying some trade, technical degree, or university degree, we make an agreement with the centers of technical teaching, like the National Polytechnic University and the universities. Through the tobacco school, we trained young people in the trade of cigar making and later we formed partnerships with companies so that they were offered work. Approximately 500 young people who were trained are now employed. The fact that the ATC offers all these opportunities attracts young people because in one way or another they feel that the organization is solving a problem for them.

The other thing is that in hard tobacco here in Estelí 70% of the workforce is young. There are a lot of young people. These young people are both union leaders and members. Similarly, in the countryside we have quite a lot of young



people — young people who are children of the members of the cooperative, young people who are children of those of the farmer associations. We always want the youth to be involved as part of the continuity of the organization because if we don't involve the youth, then in the future the organization would suddenly disappear. That would be the end of it. That's why we want young people to absorb all the experience of our historical leadership, the people who know the organization, so that they can continue the struggle.

## THE ATC'S TOBACCO SCHOOL IN ESTELÍ

Since 2007, when the second phase of the Revolution began, we recognize here in Nicaragua that our Government of Unity and Reconciliation opens up space for dialogue and consensus. In 2008, 2009, our organization through the Francisco Morazán School and the director of this program, compañera Julia Margarita Trujillo, began to develop what is called "the tripartite social dialogue." This dialogue was aimed at workers represented by our organization, the state, the Ministry of Labor and related institutions, and the government. The intention of the social dialogue was to solve problems through negotiation processes in which the employers, the workers and the Ministry of Labor, or state institutions were all at the table. It was something that was very nice because before there were very ugly situations. There were strikes. There were massive layoffs of workers, violations of their rights because perhaps the workers were demanding something but the employer didn't want

to hear them or there was no one to act as a mediator. But the policy has since changed. Now when workers have a problem, they explain it, the employer gives his version, and the Ministry of Labor looks for a solution that does not affect neither worker nor the employer. Everyone wins.

This allowed us to interact with many companies whereas before, when we arrived at the gate, we had to talk to the security guard to offer an invitation to a worker. Now the doors are open to us and we can enter directly to see the workers, to work with them. Among the positive things that came out of this dialogue process, a training process emerged. Trainings were held. Meetings were held. Technical standards of labor competence were drawn up. Initiatives arose. One is the labor certification for workers who had more than five years of experience — a lot of experience in the area of tobacco — but didn't have a document that accredited them, that certified them, that qualified them. When they left a company, it was very difficult to find work in another company because they didn't have a qualification. Sometimes they had to go to the company where they were before and the manager or the head of the company would give a letter of recommendation but when the worker was unfairly dismissed or perhaps claimed a right, then the employer, the administrator, or the manager was unhappy and obviously not going to issue the worker that letter. That was a barrier for them to work.

Since the beginning of this certification process, everything was accompanied by a technical team from INATEC (National Technological Institute) and the Peasant Worker School as well as technicians from the company where were done to know if the worker had sufficient knowledge.



Learning how to roll cigars at the ATC School of Tobacco





Hanging tobacco leaves to dry at San Nicolas farm

If the worker answered all those questions and showed that he had a handle on the job, he would receive an INATEC certificate and that certificate became his letter of recommendation. After, for example, he would say: "I'm not going to continue in this company, but I'm going to go to another one." Then he would go and show his certificate and have the doors open. Many of them were promoted because those certificates generated more confidence, more security, more self-esteem. Some who were boncheros or roleros were promoted to be reviewers, supervisors, or even heads of areas, and that was very positive. Approximately 2,000 workers were certified here throughout the tobacco process.

Later, the need arose to develop a tobacco school because at that time, starting in 2010 and onwards, companies were not hiring people that did not know the trade. There were lots of young people who went to companies in search of work but when they asked, "Do you know how to bunch? Do you know how to roll?" and they said, "no." Then, there was no opportunity. We were constantly hearing on the radio: "Workers wanted, boncheros wanted, roleros with experience wanted." But with experience. We thought, "What can we do?" At that time, the Peasant Worker School was able to coordinate with INATEC the formation of a school that would train young people in the trade so that they would learn. So they went to work. The companies did not give this opportunity because they said that teaching a person required a real investment and because they needed people who were dedicated to teaching them. You need raw materials. We were able to make the idea a

reality through the youthskills employment program that INATEC was promoting at the time and we started the tobacco school. This process began with an official call through the unions. That is to say, a great part of the young people who entered this process were children of workers, of single mothers who did not have a job, young people who lived in the marginalized neighborhoods of the city and who were susceptible to falling into delinquent groups, gangs, drug addiction, alcoholism. Then we began to make a call to recruit these young people and indeed here we had lines of young people who were interested in that opportunity. Manuals were prepared to provide theoretical and practical training. Two spaces were set up here with all the conditions of a factory. There was the workstation with a chair, keys, guillotines or rolling machines, presses, raw material, drawers. Everything they needed we had. We had a technical staff — teachers trained in the subject, Cubans, others from here in Estelí but with years of experience, trade unionists as well. And the course was held in 80 hours, on weekends, Saturdays and Sundays. We also had the weekday class option. We made this agreement with the companies so that the young people would go and practice. When they were a few days away from finishing the course, we took them to the company so that they could familiarize themselves with the environment. Many of them said, "I had never entered a factory before. This is a new experience. This gives me confidence." We talked to the managers. In fact, when we arrived with the groups, the managers would say, "Leave me this many workers. I'm going to hire them here." That was very important, that the companies had confidence in the school and opened the space.



So in that way we were able to train approximately 500 young men and women. We can say that the impact was very positive. This solved a problem they had, which was that they didn't have jobs. The school opened this space of opportunity. It improved their economic situation. The single mothers, for example, said, "I didn't have enough to support my children. but now I'm receiving an income." This part is resolved. Others wanted to study but for lack of resources could not, even though they wanted to contribute to the economy and to their family. Like the personal achievements that all young people have, they wanted to dress, to wear nice clothes, to go out, to study, to do something. That was very important.

The other part is that young people, instead of doing drugs or drinking liquor in the street, or forming a gang, were in a factory from Monday to Friday. They found new friends there in the factory. On weekends, they would say, "I'm going to study. On Sunday, I'm going to Church." Or those who didn't go to Church or didn't study, "I'm going to rest because I had a week of work." So, we could say the impact was very good. We run into the young men and women in the street and they always express their gratitude to the organization for giving them that opportunity. It was a full scholarship.

## THE OPPOSITION'S MANIPULATION OF YOUTH

A small group of students was used as a facade to sell the message internationally of the Nicaraguan student body, but they did not represent a significant force of students. I don't know if one day it was 20% of students, but it didn't represent a majority, as they wanted us to believe at the international level. Behind these students are the real organizers of the coup: the Catholic Church, the business community, and the NGOs, right-wing NGOs that know that our current government has made great achievements that are evident not only for Nicaragua but also internationally. They manipulated many young people who do not have a political conscience, who have no ideological formation and who perhaps do not know anything about the history of our country, how General Sandino emerged, how Carlos Fonseca, the father of the Revolution, emerged, the clandestine struggle of the Sandinista Front, and all that it meant to overthrow a dictatorship and come to power. They don't know about all the achievements of the Revolution. They don't know how the opposition began to manipulate

people, buying them to provoke a counterrevolution in Nicaragua. They don't know that 16 years of neoliberalism were a great setback for Nicaragua. They don't have any information about that.

So, they have minds that are easily manipulated. A lot of them went because their friends said, "Let's go to a march." Then they got up and went but didn't know what they were going to do. It's in the interviews. They asked, "What are you doing here?" "I'm with my friends," they said. Things like that, really. Because young people are like that. Look, someone gets up and there are always followers. That's what happens. But it didn't represent the student body here. I'm sure most of the students said, "No, I don't identify with that. Those are destroyers of the country. I'm a student but I don't identify with that."

The visible faces that we saw were faces that were manipulated by Catholicism, through their youth ministry. They were manipulated by business, by the same civil society organizations. Sadly, they were also bought. "We are going to pay you and you are going to say that you are representing the students in their majority." But it is not true. Therefore, many of them were unfortunately victims. They were used. At an international level, they made people believe that they were students, but they were not students. There were demonstrations and some— a few small groups of students -- reacted, students of that kind, but most of them were criminals.

For example, they said, "Inhabitants of Estelí have the city blocked," but they were not the inhabitants of Estelí. Estelí has 250,000 inhabitants and there were 50 people there and they weren't students either. They were criminals. They were delinquents and they were told, "We are going to pay you so much and we are going to give you food every day." Then, the media said, "The population has blocked Estelí" but the people were indignant here, saying, "They won't let us work. This is affecting us." And people wanted to react. It is worth noting that here in Nicaragua there are disciplined people and they were waiting for the government's orientation. If the government had said that the people were rising up, here they would have risen up. It would have been a terrible bloodbath. But the government said, "No. Calm down. Stay in your homes. Save your lives." So that's why people didn't go out. They waited, they waited for the government.





# Alejandro Villareyna

Secretary of Organizing,  
ATC Estelí

# I am Alejandro Villareyna...

I am a lawyer and notary public. In the ATC, I am the advisor and Secretary of Organizing. I began working with the ATC in 1996 when the Rural Youth Movement was founded within the ATC. At that time, I lived in a community called San Pedro in the municipality of Condega, department of Estelí. While I was in the Rural Youth Movement, I began studying at law school and once I graduated in 2004, I joined the ATC to work. My first job was only to advise on how to put into practice my knowledge as a graduate, as a lawyer. Later, I joined the departmental structure of the ATC.

## ATC ESTELÍ'S WORK

The work that we develop is directed especially in the organizational work of our unions, which includes the drafting of statutes, the formation of unions, procedures in the Ministry of Labor for the due certification of legal personality, statutes, and the certification of the board of directors. Also, our legislation determines that we have to annually update this information by electing a new board of directors for unions each year. We also are constantly updating trainings on labor rights, collective bargaining, negotiation techniques, social security, leadership, among other issues that are of interest to workers. And we also have to do trainings on issues of new laws coming out. Also accompaniment in the drafting of petition forms, lawsuits made by workers in their workplaces, is part of the advice we provide.

Our work also has multiple functions because we focus on other aspects: The issue of young people, the issue of women within the ATC, the issue of cooperatives within the ATC, the issue of farmers of basic grains that are within the organization, with some important focuses, such as the rescue of native seeds. And we also provide legal and juridical accompaniment in the Ministry of Labor and courts for lawsuits, for payment of social benefits, final settlements, social security, for reinstatement of persons who are protected by jurisdiction, for reinstatement to their job, for violation of fundamental rights in the event that members of the union board of directors are dismissed. That means a whole accompaniment from the preparation of the lawsuit to the accompaniment in the respective hearings

and to present the ordinary, extraordinary remedies that the law establishes for all these cases. And in addition to that, as the ATC, as a legal office too, we provide services to the general public; in preparation of everything that has to do with public deed through the transfer of property, personal property, real estate. We do all of this within the ATC.

It's kind of complicated work, really, because we're a small team relative to all the work that needs to be done. The department of Estelí is quite large. We have an affluence of large companies located in Estelí. We have a workforce in the formal tobacco industry of more than 32,000 or 33,000 direct jobs and within this work we find great difficulties. Some aspects to be taken up are the fact that people or workers, for the most part, are not interested in organizing unions. They do not see it as an investment, as a necessity, to be organized to defend the few victories, much less to fight to conquer another benefit, another right. We encounter the culture of individualism: "If I'm fine, I don't care if others are fired, if they violate rights, that a pregnant woman is fired for the simple fact of being pregnant." Among so many violations that take place within companies, we also find that people say, "I lose. I don't care. If they fire me, I'll just leave." That's what people say.

Imagine that some of the workers express the desire to



organize in unions and their own compañeros speak badly of them so that they get fired, not the manager nor the company owners. I lived that experience. I worked in a company called NAXA, a foreign-owned tobacco company, and I remember that we wanted to form a union. I'm talking about 2001 more or less. What happened was this: we already had the minimum number of workers required by law to form a union and suddenly there was a compañera who realized it, and brought us up to the management of the company and they fired us all. And so there was a second attempt. They fired us the same way. On the third attempt, we managed to establish a union there which we called a white union because the majority of its board members were people who had management positions within the company. Even so, with them we were able to do some consciousness-raising work and we were able to form a fairly good union, quite strong, actually.

Today those unions have been weakened precisely because of the anti-union policies of employers despite

the regulations of the free zone law, which fundamentally requires that they allow union organization. Here I can mention big companies like My Father, like Plasencia. They say, "No, no, no, no. We don't accept a union." And when someone wants to make one, the first thing they do is fire them. So there is this union repression and persecution by employers.

We've had terrible experiences here. Once a union was formed in a tobacco company here in Estelí and the employer manipulated his workers, threatening them that if the union was organized, they would close and leave. He got them on a bus and they came to protest here at the ATC. So, the workers, for fear of losing their jobs, decided to stage a protest against the ATC, when the work of the ATC is the accompaniment of workers for the improvement of their standard of living; that the workers organize themselves and can defend their victories and can obtain greater profits within the company.

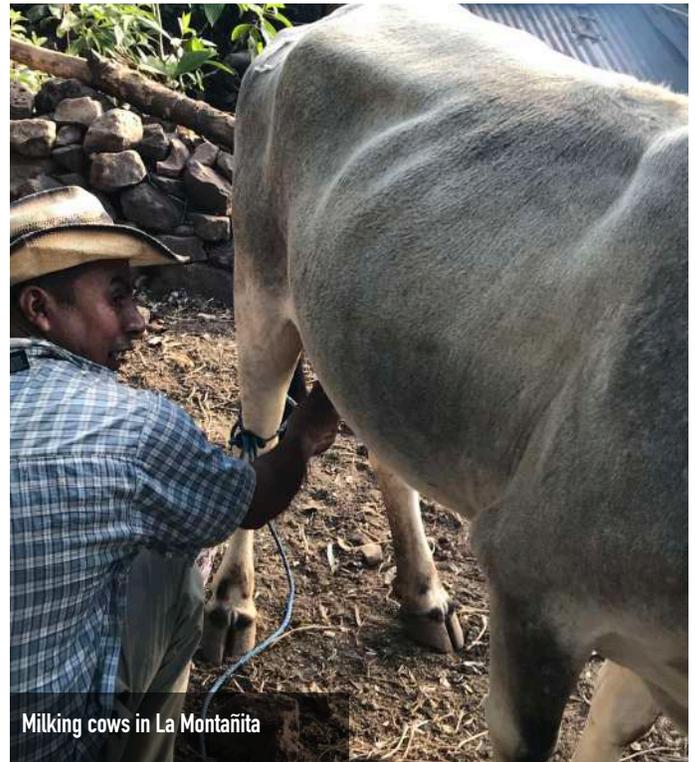


Women factory workers sorting leaves in preparation for cigar-making

# A LONG-TERM STRUGGLE

Many, many things have been achieved, and among them is the fact that there is more job stability. We are not going to say that income has improved significantly. In some companies, yes. It has improved significantly in some companies where we have a union. What has been achieved is that the employer increases the workers' salary each year. That has made it so that today, we have union workers who manage to obtain a salary almost equal to the cost of the *canasta basica* in Nicaragua. But in another sector, the sector where tobacco is grown, the salary is very low. In order for the workers to obtain a salary, the price of a *canasta basica*, 2 or 3 members of a family have to work.

We are the second poorest country in Latin America. Only Haiti is below us. We know the causes of poverty in this country, but even so, we consider that we have lived better

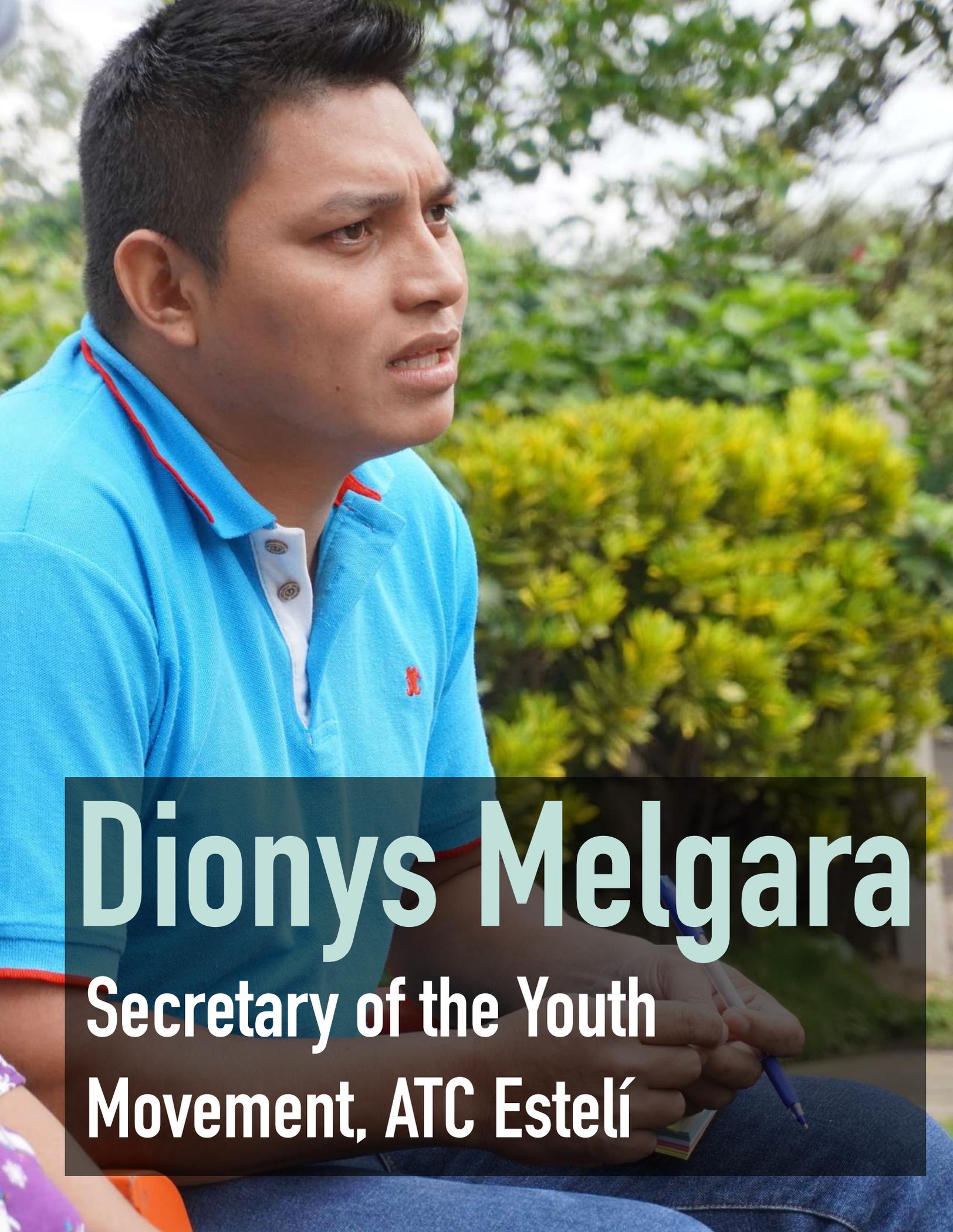


times and we believe that we are going to live better times because we are a people who are characterized by work, by solidarity and above all because we like to move forward. Despite all the situations we've lived through here — we have lived in war for a number of years, entire decades, and that undoubtedly makes us poor.

All these things are part of our struggle and it is what we aspire to: that our workers one day achieve a more dignified salary, a salary that serves them to buy, at minimum, their *canasta basica*. I believe that the day we achieve this, we will be able to say that we have achieved our objectives. It continues to be a struggle that we don't know when it will end. We believe that the workers' struggle is a struggle that never ends because as long as there are workers, as long as there are companies or businessmen, there will always be an antagonistic struggle of two different classes. One that resists and another that will always look for ways to keep you down. That is the reality. And that doesn't just happen in Nicaragua, it happens all over the world, even in the most developed countries in the world, like the United States.

“...we believe that we are going to live better times because we are a people who are characterized by work, by solidarity and above all because we like to move forward.”





**Dionys Melgara**

**Secretary of the Youth  
Movement, ATC Estelí**

# I am Dionys Melgara...

I am from the department of Estelí, Nicaragua. I am part of the executive team of the departmental federation of Estelí. My role is to act as coordinator of the Rural Youth Movement. Our intention is to train these young people in relevant issues: about gender equality, ecology, labor rights, cooperativism, among other issues focused in the areas where they themselves are inserted working.

For example, when we train young people on the issue of defending labor rights, we deal clearly with the subject of trade unionism, so that young people understand that the struggles are not only lived today but also that struggles have come from years ago, the struggles that took place before. Many people died because of those struggles for the rights that today we enjoy, like the eight-hour work day. What we expect with these young people is that they also continue the role of the leaders who are aging, so that they assume a role in the renewal of this generation that is about to leave, not because they don't want to continue working but because of their work, because of their tiredness from so many years of working. So, we have to search for a generational renewal, but also be committed to the work done by our organization, committed to the vision of our

organization without losing the direction in which we work. We fight for the social welfare of workers, always seeking the best for our society and members.

To explain a little about the work of the ATC Estelí: the ATC Estelí has in its structure a general secretary. We have an organizational secretary. We also have a training secretary and I'm the youth secretary. We make a good team because the ATC has given us the task of training (our members) and it never stops training us. Every day we are training ourselves. The ATC, through its 41-year trajectory, has been able to train lawyers to become specialists in labor rights. Our organization has legal offices with lawyers who provide advice to workers who are wrongly dismissed. As lawyers they take other cases but their specialty is to defend the rights of the workers when the workers come to make their complaints. They take their legal proceedings and win their cases because they're specialists in rights. Sometimes, with workers, what happens is that when a young person resigns, they don't receive the social benefits they are entitled to, which is where the lawyers come in to make sure that everything they're owed is paid to the worker.



# ATC'S WORK IN CIGAR FACTORIES

There are more than 60 cigar companies and out of those 60, we have organized unions in at least seven to ten. It is not easy to get or form unions within those companies. As the comrade Edgardo Garcia (founder and General Secretary of the ATC) said, before if you spoke of cooperativism, of struggle, it was synonymous with persecution, and even death. Today the companies won't kill us for going to promote union organizing, but they will close doors on us so that we don't talk to their workers about unions.

There are these very difficult employers that don't want us to train and empower the workers to defend their rights. That does not suit them. Some of the abuses that are committed, for example with the workers, is the persecution for the act of being a trade unionist and unjustified dismissal. Also demands. Sometimes they get very demanding with the workers. But in addition to that, other things have to do with health and safety. Some companies do not provide the ideal conditions so that the worker feels comfortable and can work in comfort, in human well-being. So, that is the role that we play and we work so that the employer can provide the workers with good conditions.

## WOMEN & THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

There are two main activities for the creation of the finished cigar; they are called *rolado* and *bonchado*. The *bonchado* is made by the man because it is a little more rustic, and the *rolado* is made by the woman because it is the last layer of tobacco leaves that finishes the puro or cigar. The woman has much more delicacy to do that work, but that does not mean that the man can't do the role of the woman or the man that of the woman. In some factories both do the two activities, but in others the man does one thing and the woman another. Because they have to be in pairs, she does this and he does the other.

Sometimes the factories don't comply with the laws, sometimes they abuse them. For example, if a pregnant



woman has a pain or another type of illness and says, "I have to go to the clinic. Give me permission to go." They don't give it to her and if she goes on her own, then she loses her work day. They automatically take it off as a form of abuse, a hit and run. This is illegal because the Labor Code has its regulations and says that if a person is sick, they have the right to go for a consultation and be remunerated for the day because they present a certificate showing they went to the doctor. Sometimes this happens even if the worker brings the certificate and presents it to the employer. Not only do they take away that day, but they also take away what is called the seventh day, which is given through accumulating days or hours of work; by law it is required to have one day of rest per week with pay. The abuse occurs when you go to the doctor and present proof and they don't recognize it, not only do you lose that day, but you lose the seventh day of pay. Another common case is when the manager sees a very beautiful woman. If the manager flirts and she doesn't reciprocate, they get angry and fire her, as a way to manipulate the woman, to manipulate her by force. Some abuses are of that kind, the harassment of women.

Speaking on the topic of unions, between workers there is an indifference about joining the union. Not everyone joins



the unions. It would be nice for everyone to join the union so that everyone protests and pronounces their problems, their difficulties that they face in their work. But they don't, and sometimes they even tell the board of directors of the union, "You don't do anything. Why would I join a union?" For this type of person it's easy to say this to the union leaders, but when the union (the union board as well as the membership) raises its voice against an employer, they are not supported by these people who criticize the leadership.

It is a struggle that is lived. Sometimes there are leaders who want to throw in the towel due to confronting these realities within the companies, with the workers themselves. We motivate them and we tell them that we are going to keep moving forward. Only when we reach the day that the workers no longer want a union, will it be our end. But as long as there are one, two, or three workers who want to fight for a union, we are going to stay alive as an organization, fighting for the demands and the labor rights of the workers. We will be there, happy to work. Happy because to advocate in at least nine or ten companies is an achievement. We are up against these big businessmen and it is not easy to work with them or confront them to form unions. So we are always there, fighting the battles. Through the good and the bad we are there with the workers.

## THE ECONOMY FOLLOWING THE FAILED COUP ATTEMPT

I think Estelí was one of the least affected by this phenomenon because the companies did stand up. I think that in the first national strike there were some who (stopped) because of fear, because of threats, from these individuals who attempted the failed coup, terrorists really, who joined the strike. But after in other strikes, they did not stop production. They continued the course. They continued their work and they did not stop production.

It didn't suit the companies, either. If they are part of the private companies or COSEP, they probably would have stopped by orders of COSEP, but they didn't. That really benefited the workers and themselves. By continuing work, both benefited. Some small companies, mini companies, closed because there is also a phenomenon among the same employers that the biggest companies drown the small companies. The big companies have the largest number of workers and now they are even expanding their businesses. It is expected that this year there will be about 5,000 more direct jobs, so they are growing.



José Antonio with ATC union leaders



