

Helping Nicaragua

by LOIS CORBETT

President Ronald may send his money to Nicaragua to buy rainwear and cigarettes for the contra, but people in Atlantic Canada are delivering items they know people of that war-torn country can use best: fish nets, seed potatoes, lobster traps and cattle.

Atlantic Canadians are helping the small Latin American country and in return are learning about social revolution every time a shipload of goods, or a plane-load of livestock, or another tour of individuals leaves Canada's eastern coast destined for Nicaragua.

Carolyn van Gulp is an Oxfam Canada worker based in Halifax, and she says ever since the first tour to Nicaragua was organized by labour groups in Atlantic Canada three years ago, more and more people have become involved in collecting goods for the people there, in pressuring the Canadian government to take a "separate and different" stand on American intervention, and in organizing development projects.

"The people who have been in Nicaragua, the foresters, the fishermen, and individuals, have gone to see how that society works. They have seen the society that the Nicaraguans are developing, and they think of it in terms of something that they would like to see develop here. Going there brings us a bit closer to creating our own society, one that puts emphasis on its people.

"Supporting people in Nicaragua is really helping ourselves, and as long as Nicaragua survives, there is hope for us in developing a more egalitarian society," she says.

That hope, and the desire to help other people is one reason the Maritime Fishermen's Union went on that first tour, says Gilles Theriault, the organization's executive director. "When the fishermen here got involved, it was all politics aside," he says. "They just want to help. They see the poverty these people are living, and they do what they can. It seems that people who don't have much are the first to give whatever they can."

The MFU has made contact with fishermen and the government's department of fisheries in Nicaragua in the last three years — contact that has meant sending fishermen from the inshore fishery to Nicaragua for tours, showing Nicaraguan fishermen around Atlantic Canada, and sending nets, needles, lobster traps and filleting knives to their new friends. Theriault says the union hopes to arrange for a boat builder to travel to Nicaragua some time next year as well.

"It's an exchange that is fisherman to fisherman. We are exchanging ideas and techniques, and we are helping out any way we can. It's certainly not a question of fishermen not being generous. It's just the amount of time we need to reach more fishermen and get them involved with the projects," says Theriault.

The Maritime Fishermen's Union represents inshore fishermen in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia, the people who Theriault says are the "poorest of all fishermen, generally." But fishermen in Nicaragua's inshore are even worse off.



Nicaraguan fishermen Ernesto Herrera (left) and Danilo Collado (right) try lobster fishing with MFU's Theriault

"They don't really have any decent boats for inshore fishing. So when some of them came up here for the tour, they were really interested in seeing how we made our boats, and the different designs that could be used in their country," he says.

Other organizations in Atlantic Canada are also trying to "sidestep the political rhetoric" and deal directly with the people of Nicaragua. Steve Garrett, who works with Tools for Peace in Halifax, says his organization has gone door-to-door collecting "essentials for life," to send to Nicaragua. Tools for Peace collected 80 blankets and a variety of cooking utensils in one of their campaigns, as well as contributing to a national drive for school supplies — pens, papers and notebooks to stock

projects, says they have sent five plane-loads of cattle to Nicaragua as well as a variety of equipment necessary for the dairy industry.

"We sent down 1,313 head of cattle — purebred holstein calves, and \$4.5 million worth of equipment — mowers, choppers, bailers and self-unloading wagons," he says.

Lister has been in Nicaragua five times investigating the dairy project, which includes 8,000 hectares of farm land and some 8,000 head of dairy cattle. The N.B. farmers involved are curious about Nicaragua, and especially about the progress of the cattle.

"They are interested in how their calves have grown, and they are thinking about

a very few soldiers," Theriault and van Gulp both saw the results of the war supported by American money.

"What struck me most was the damage done by the contras. We visited a co-operative that had been attacked three times and still the people were committed to staying there and rebuilding after each attack. But there's no doubt that their progress is severely affected," says Theriault.

Van Gulp says the people she talked to in Nicaragua when she toured there last April "had total disgust for the contra. They were furious with them."

"I talked to the president of one of the agricultural co-ops. He was an older man and he told me a lot about life before the revolution. Before the revolution the people worked for one farmer. They had no schooling and barely enough to eat. They built their new homes after the revolution when the owner fled the country and the government turned the land into a co-op. This man went on at great length with everything I asked.

"But when I asked him if he thought the contra would win, he just said no. There was no question about it," she says.

People-to-people contact has meant sending seed potatoes from N.B. and P.E.I. to Nicaragua, as well as health supplies, and information about nutrition. Atlantic Canadians are doing what they can to help the country and its people survive, and they are as determined to see Nicaragua develop as its own citizens. "It is an inspiration for people who go there from here," says van Gulp.

It seems that people who don't have much are the first to give.

the ever-increasing number of Nicaraguan schools.

"We're giving people here an opportunity to express their solidarity with other people who need our help. Atlantic Canadians can relate to people who are trying to survive. That sense of kinship is something we need more of," says Garrett.

The New Brunswick Department of Agriculture is responsible for a \$13.2 million contract that is helping to set up a livestock and dairy program in Nicaragua through CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency. DeWitt Lister, the department's director of special

organizing a tour for themselves next year. I haven't heard one negative comment from them about the project," says Lister.

The Nicaraguans working at the dairy project about 15 kilometers outside of Managua are determined and dedicated, he says. "They have put in a lot of time, as part of their plan of developing agriculture in their country. The general managers of the farm and the herd managers that I have talked to are very pleased about the project."

While Lister says in his visits he has seen "no indication of contra activities and only