

# Nicaragua coffee harvest draws Portland volunteers

by Robert Lothian

Nicaragua needs coffee pickers, and a group from Portland is going down to help.

Nancy Webster, a representative of the Portland Central America Solidarity Committee and co-coordinator of the Portland-Nicaragua coffee brigades, says that Nicaragua has had to shift workers and soldiers closer to the borders to defend against contra attacks. Also, she said, former coffee pickers now have land because of the country's revolutionary land reform programs. The revolution means they no longer have to pick coffee, she said.

Consequently, said Webster, Nicaragua has fewer pickers this year, yet because coffee is one of the country's essential cash crops, "It's critical for them to get the crop in so they can get their cash flow going." Production battalions have already been formed in Nicaragua, she said, made up of 25,000 volunteers from cities including students, government employees and housewives.

In addition, she said, the Nicaraguan government has put out a call for international volunteers, and fourteen from Portland are going. They range in age from late teen-age to age 67, she said, and will leave Portland in two groups, one on January 29th, the other Feb. 12th. After meeting in Miami with other North American volunteers, they will leave for Managua on Aeronica, the Nicaraguan airline, which is offering special reduced fares.

Webster said volunteers pay for their transportation to Nicaragua, but once in the country the Nicaraguan government will pick up food, housing and transportation costs. She said the volunteers will work with Nicaraguans, and live as they do.

Conditions on the coffee farms are rugged and the work hard, she said. Food is mainly rice and beans, and volunteers can expect to go without electricity and plumbing. Work lasts from early morning until about noon, she said, with afternoons set aside for educational and cultural activities. Total cost including transportation is expected to be \$500-\$700.

Webster said the brigades offer volunteers a chance to give while the CIA "trains and supplies the contras that are attacking the country." Also, she said, volunteers will be able to experience first-hand Nicaragua's revolutionary society. "It's really important to experience the people and the country," she said. "Maybe it's really good for us to step out of our culture sometimes. The ultimate thing is that you see people as people—then you're not going to want to send bombs and mortars."

Those who go, she said, are preparing to come back and talk about their trip with photos, slide shows, even films. One of their pre-brigade tasks, she said, is to organize material aid—medical supplies and clothing—which they will take with them and deliver to the Nicaraguans they work with. That will inaugurate an ongoing "sister city" material aid project between Portland and Nicaragua, she said.

Webster said Nicaragua needs a successful harvest to be able to purchase basic foodstuffs, medicine, spare parts for industry and transportation, and oil. Coffee production has been targetted by CIA-back counterrevolutionaries who have already inflicted several hundred million dollars worth of damage against oil storage facilities and other parts of the economy. According to Webster, coffee brigade volunteers will not work in areas where there is danger from contra attacks.

Presently ten percent of Nicaragua's land is dedicated to coffee growing. The \$133 million income that Nicaragua generated from selling its 1982-83 coffee harvest accounted for 30 percent of exports. In addition, 100,000 jobs are created during the peak months of November and December.

*(Those interested in joining the brigades should call 282-2407.)*