From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua

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“Our movement was born in a storm.” The activist quoted (page 103) in this excellent study of maquila workers’ advocacy in Nicaragua was not referring to tumultuous relations with the owners of garment factories in Managua’s Free Trade Zone. Nor did Maria Luisa’s movement originate in a "storm" of conflict between workers and the neoliberal state of the 1990s. Rather the storm she is describing is the birth of the Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement “Mar’a Elena Cuadra” (MEC) in the virtual expulsion of women leaders from the Sandinista trade union federation (CST) in 1994.
Jennifer Bickam Mendez's *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras*: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua tells the story of MEC for the decade after its stormy birth. Mendez only mentions the 1990 electoral defeat of the FSLN in passing; her framework is postrevolutionary Nicaragua, and she looks at MEC as part of a broader international process of organizing as workers and as women to confront the problems posed by globalization. But her description of the behavior and priorities of the official leadership of the CST (and behind them the National Directorate of the FSLN itself) at the beginning of the 1990s helps to explain why the FSLN lost the election. The book is thus valuable to those seeking to understand the rise and fall of the Nicaraguan revolution, as well as to those interested in feminist ethnography and social movement theory.

The CST, like the FSLN, never elected a single woman to its leading body in the nearly eleven years the FSLN was in power in Nicaragua. But its Women's secretariat, directed by future MEC leader Sara Rodríguez, included experienced and committed organizers at both the national and local level. While the CST leadership went along with the reopening of Managua's Free Trade Zone by the pro-business government elected in 1990, the Women's Secretariat worked tirelessly to organize the overwhelmingly female garment workers of the FTZ and to help set up clinics and other services to cushion the dismantling of the Sandinista-era social programs. Increasing hostility between the CST officials and the Women's secretariat culminated at the 1994 congress, which was moved at the last minute to a remote location. Delegates from the Women's Secretariat found their entry barred by armed security and their candidates for the CST executive rejected. One month later, 400 women met to form MEC; double that number attended the first anniversary celebration in 1995. By the early 2000's thousands of female workers had benefited from MEC job training, human rights workshops, and legal assistance.

An important part of the identity of MEC lies in its independence from the CST, in the fact that it is emphatically not a union. At the same time, the CST and the FSLN are everywhere in this history, in positive as well as negative ways. Overwhelmingly, the activists of MEC got their training (and sometimes basic literacy) in the Sandinista organizations and party during the revolutionary years. Many were experienced and confident workers' leaders before they were feminists; Mendez gives the example of Josefina, a former textile worker, union organizer in a paper products factory, and a member of the textile workers union federation in the 1980s, in addition to being a respected community leader (page 140). The upper-class and professional leaders of the autonomous women's movement in Nicaragua also came out of the FSLN. Activists of the MEC even found former Sandinistas in the Ministry of Labor, and, one suspects, among some of the businessmen employing maquila labor.

Mendez describes MEC's struggle to define itself and to navigate extremely complex relationships with a variety of social and political actors: the independent feminist movement made up mainly of middle-class and upper-class women (the author has a wonderful scene of waiting in the dark and rain for a bus with an MEC member and getting splashed with mud by the car of another feminist coming out of the same posh meeting); the organized union movement, still dominated by the CST; and the foreign NGOs on which MEC was totally dependent for financial support. Attempting to advance the rights and working conditions of female maquila workers in this potential minefield, MEC developed a strategy Mendez calls "self-limiting," (page 63) rejecting direct action or anything that smacked of confrontational union tactics in favor of negotiations with employers and government bodies, lobbying and moral persuasion. Although Mendez lays out both the accomplishments and the problems that arose from these tactics, this is one place I was not totally comfortable with what she describes as her "insider/outsider" role (page 18). As a staff member (cooperante) of MEC, she was herself responsible for helping to devise and implement this strategy, which she is at the same time trying to approach critically.

Mendez's theoretical analysis of MEC as a "social movement organization" (page 66) that functions as both a working women's organization and as part of the Latin American feminist movement will be useful to students of social movements in other countries. She points to the characteristics that MEC shares with non-class-based "new social movements" around Latin America. But the most fascinating and important thing about MEC's story, at least for this reader, is what is peculiarly Nicaraguan about it, and in particular the organization's complicated and pervasive relationship with the legacy and memory of the Nicaraguan revolution.