

REGIONAL INTERNATIONAL FORUM NEWSLETTER



REGION WELCOMES INTERNATIONAL VISITOR

As part of our continuing links with Nicaraguan trade unions, in November we welcomed Flavia Ocampo from The Health workers union FETSALUD . Flavia is a pharmacist by profession and works for SILAIS where she has a regulatory role over local/private chemists .

Flavia has been FETSALUDs Secretary of Youth, Culture and Sports since 2022 and for the last 3 years has participated as part of the Nicaraguan workers group at the ILO (International Labour Organisation)



Flavia with Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health UNISON
Right to left: Andy Chafer (Branch Secretary), Flavia Ocampo (FETSALUD), Angela Bridges (Branch Chair) & Joyce Heard (Joint Branch Secretary & Treasurer)



As part of her stay, Flavia visited Branches to meet with activists, attend meetings and tour workplaces.



Flavia visiting the Pharmacy at Wolverhampton New Cross Hospital
Right to left: Mark Ondrak (Branch Secretary, Wolverhampton Acute Health UNISON Branch) Angela Davis (Clinical Director of Pharmacy) Abi McCrory (Regional Office) and Tim Hollins (Birmingham Cuba Solidarity Campaign) with Pharmacy staff.

Special thanks must go to Abi McCrory, Maddie Price and Hazel Mooney at the Regional Office for all their work to make the visit a success.

REGIONAL INTERNATIONAL FORUM MEETINGS

- Wednesday, 29 January 2025 (12 Midday to 2 pm)
- Wednesday, 7 May 2025 (12 Midday to 2 pm)
- Wednesday, 3 September 2025 (12 Midday to 2 pm)
- Wednesday, 5 November 2025 (12 Midday to 2 pm)

All meetings will be hybrid (online/in-person at Regional Office) for details contact

m.price@unison.co.uk

NICARAGUA - PRACTICAL SOLIDARITY

My Impressions of This First World Country (Flavia Ocampo, FETSALUD)

Introduction

My stay in England was a transformative experience, both personally and professionally. This journey not only allowed me to discover the country's cultural and historical richness but also to understand the impact of its organisational systems and diverse society. Each activity, from visits to hospitals to meetings with unions and youth forums, provided valuable lessons that enriched my perspective on collective work, public health, and labour rights.



With Ravi Subramanian Regional Secretary at the Regional Awards Ceremony

First Impressions of English Environment & Culture

From the moment I arrived, England presented itself as a country where tradition and modernity converge harmoniously. The cities, with their historic architecture intertwined with contemporary buildings, reflect a society in constant evolution. The punctuality and courtesy of the English people stand out as deeply rooted cultural values. However, what struck me most was the cultural diversity evident in every corner, especially in cities like London, where multiple languages and traditions coexist, enriching the social fabric.

Customs and Traditions

Daily life in England reflects a balance between formality and warmth. The traditional afternoon tea, coffee, or hot chocolate, a symbol of English

hospitality, was a special moment to connect with people and understand their lifestyle. The popular lunchtime sandwich, reflecting a lack of time for cooking, was another notable cultural aspect. The respect for rules and organization, evident even in public spaces, was remarkable. This structured approach, combined with an openness to change, is reflected in both daily culture and the labour and union environments



In office of Mary MacArthur (Leader of Chain Makers Strike of 1910) Black Country Living Museum

Visits to Hospitals

During the hospital visits, it became clear that the United Kingdom's public health system, the National Health Service (NHS), is a cornerstone of its society. It was inspiring to observe the emphasis on comprehensive patient care, the use of advanced technology, and the continuous training of health professionals. Additionally, I was able to appreciate the importance of community values in the provision of medical services, an aspect that deeply resonates with the family and community health model we promote in Nicaragua.



With Mark Ondrak, Branch Secretary (Wolverhampton Acute Health Branch)

Meeting with Unions and Visit to UNISON

Headquarters



Meeting at Regional Office with Ravi Subramanian.
Flavia also met with Gurdeep Singh, Regional Education Organiser

The visit to the UNISON headquarters was one of the most memorable moments of the trip. I will carry it in my heart because they made me feel like family, never leaving me alone. This union, one of the largest in the United Kingdom, is an admirable example of how organisation and solidarity can transform workers' lives.

Conversations with union leaders Dave, Ravi, Abi, and others highlighted the importance of continuous training, defending labour rights, and promoting gender equality and inclusion. It was especially inspiring to learn how they integrate the voices of their members into every decision, an approach that reinforces trust and collective commitment.

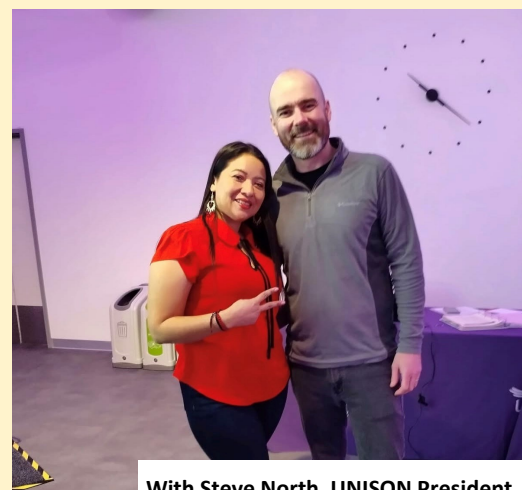
Conclusion

This trip to England was much more than a mere stay in a foreign country; it was an opportunity for profound learning and a bridge to new ideas and

perspectives. The culture, customs, and practices observed, both in hospitals and with young people and unions, are a reminder of the power of community organisation and solidarity to tackle common challenges.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to Louise Richards from Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group, who was not only my interpreter during this trip but also a pillar of support and an unconditional guide every step of the way. Her infinite patience, warmth, and willingness to help at all times made this journey even more special. She was not just a translator but also a mother in a foreign land, someone who cared for me with sincere affection, always ensuring I was comfortable and understood every detail. Her companionship turned every challenge into an opportunity and every moment into an unforgettable memory.

I also want to thank Tim Hollins and Mogs Russell, from Birmingham Cuba Solidarity Campaign who opened the doors of their home to host me during my stay in Birmingham. Their hospitality, warmth, and generosity made me feel at home, even thousands of kilometres away from my own. They were not only my interpreters but also my guides and companions in this unforgettable experience, helping me understand and appreciate every detail of the culture and environment. Their dedication and kindness reflected the best of the human spirit. Thank you for every conversation, every shared moment, and for treating me as part of your family.



With Steve North, UNISON President

Lastly, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to UNISON for providing me with this wonderful opportunity to visit their country and organisation and for their valuable support to my organisation, FETSALUD. Your invitation not only allowed me to experience the cultural and social richness of England firsthand but also to learn from your experience and commitment to defending labour rights and social justice.

Every organised activity, meeting, and exchange was an invaluable source of inspiration and learning.

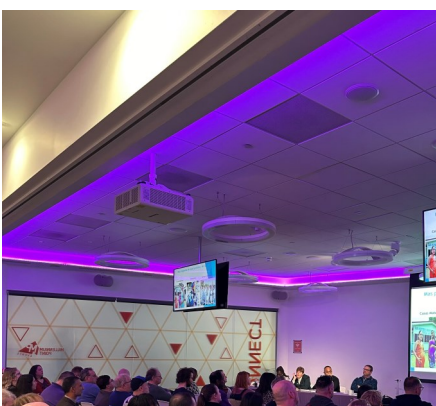
Thank you for believing in me and the work I represent, for opening the doors of your organisation, and for showing that through solidarity and collective effort, it is possible to build a fairer world. This trip marked not only a before and after in my professional life but also in my heart. Thank you for making this dream possible!

I will always carry your kindness and the example of your generosity in my heart. Thank you for everything.

I return to Nicaragua with a renewed commitment to our mission, convinced that the lessons learned will strengthen our work for the benefit of our communities. England, with its cultural richness and progressive approach, has left an indelible mark and inspires us to continue building a better future for all.



Above and left
Speaking to Regional
Council



Outlining the
FETSALUD
activist training
funded by our
Region



Below speaking at
Wolverhampton
Trades Council

Flavia's reflections on UNISON Young Members:

"Participating in the Young Members Forum and Conference was filled with hope and mutual learning. During the Conference, discussions focused on topics such as better conditions for people with disabilities, improved support for young single mothers with children, opposition to discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, combating racism, and advocating for better salaries for young people. It was encouraging to see how young people in England are committed to building a more just and equitable future. Their ideas and enthusiasm reminded us that youth is a powerful force for social change"



UNISON members at a lunchtime Q&A session with Flavia at the Regional Office

Flavia's positivity and dedication was a joy to all who met her, reminding us that young members are the future of our union.

Key outcomes of discussions during the visit included an agreed determination to build on the links made, particularly with Young Members, and that social media makes the world much smaller, enabling us to maintain direct and at times live links.

It was felt a reciprocal visit by UNISON young members be part of our plans for 2025

Dave Auger

Chair - Regional International Forum

"West Midlands Young Members was proud to engage and work with International Forum to facilitate Flavia's visit to the Region, to ask her questions about her organising in Nicaragua, what their challenges are and what we could learn from our fellow trade unionists in Nicaragua about the way they organise young members in particular. It was great to see young members bond with Flavia and our region's Young Members Conference delegation made her feel very welcome. These kinds of exchanges between workers across the world is vital work to further the dreams of trade unionism and worker solidarity, and I am very pleased to have worked so closely with the International Forum in facilitating it."

Liam Edge

Chair - Regional Young Members SOG

Birmingham Cuba Solidarity Campaign: 'Cuba Vive' Fundraiser 22nd November 2024

St Andrews Centre, Handsworth

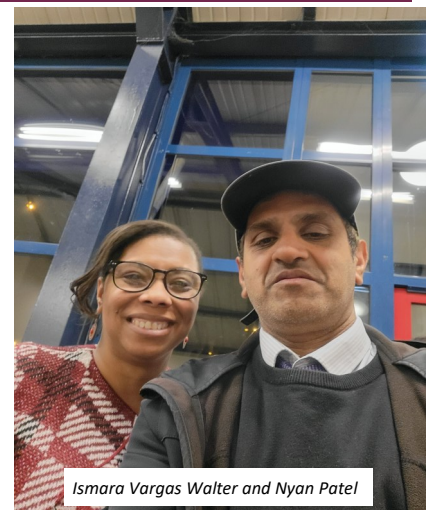
Flavia attended social event organised by Birmingham Cuba Solidarity Campaign to raise funds for their 'Cuba Vive' medical aid appeal

Flavia, along with Ismara Vargas Walter (Cuban Ambassador) were both guest speakers at the event, which consisted of Cuban food, music, Salsa dancing, a dominoes competition, a quiz about Cuba and a short film about foreign student educated in Cuba. The event was organised to raise money for the Cuba Vive medical aid appeal. **For more information please visit www.cubavive.org.uk.**

Nayan Patel (below) Branch International Relations Officer at Sandwell General Branch attended the event and reflects "I had a better understanding about Cuba, especially how the US embargo is affecting Cuba economically and socially."



Louise Richards, Nayan Patel and Flavia



Ismara Vargas Walter and Nayan Patel



Left to right: Dave Auger (International Forum Chair), Louise Richards (NSCAG), Flavia Ocampo (FETSALUD) and Liam Edge (Young Members SOG Chair)



NICARAGUA TRADE UNIONS

Have a Key role and influence in political, social, economic life

- Highly valued and respected
- Consulted on key developments such as National Poverty and Human Development Plan 2022-26
- Seats at all government commissions – health, race, education etc.
- Around a third of the FSLN's National Assembly seats held by unions
- Fully support government as they have benefitted hugely from the transformation that has taken place in Nicaraguan society since 2007

The neo-liberal years 1990-2006

- Health, education, energy and telecoms privatised
- Public sector decimated, close to collapse – two thirds of public sector workers lost their jobs
- Unemployment stood at 70%
- Trade unions saw their rights stripped away Unions
- Trade union membership plummeted – membership of public sector union UNE fell from 40,000 to 6,000
- Neo-liberal governments created parallel unions, yellow unions that were used as scab unions to undermine the real unions which represented the rights of the working class. • Collective bargaining agreements disappeared or were deregulated, affecting the real wages of workers and their families and significantly worsening living conditions.

Trade union rights restored post 2007

- The privatisation of health and education was immediately reversed and the FSLN government supported union demands for decent wages and conditions. • Collective bargaining agreements restored and respected
- Right to strike, right to organise and collective bargaining are enshrined in the constitution
- Salary and minimum wage increases take place each year (tripartite negotiation – this year 7% covering nine economic sectors)
- Low paid health workers have a right to receive an annual solidarity bonus as well as government subsidies for energy and transport
- • Education is regarded as a right not a privilege and the education sector has seen significant advances for teachers, not only in terms of pay but also much improved working conditions
- • Levels of unionisation have increased – membership of FNT is 800,000 • Growing movement + focus on women and young people

Nicaraguan trade unions now operate freely , Unlike some other countries in Latin America, not a single trade unionist has been oppressed, imprisoned or killed since 2007 • (ITUC report – Global Rights Index 2021 –)