

STUDIES | Feminisms n°03

Nela Martínez Espinosa



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Nela Martínez Espinosa
(1912–2004)

Women of Struggle, Women in Struggle



Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research
March 2022

Joint publication with the Martínez-Mériguet Archive
(Quito, Ecuador)



Nela Martínez in August 1988, one month after the death of her husband Raymond Meriguet.

Source: Nela Meriguet Martínez / Martínez-Meriguet Archive

The second half of the twentieth century was marked by national liberation struggles in the colonised countries of Africa and Asia. In Latin America, neo-colonial structures had subordinated the republics founded as independent countries at the beginning of the nineteenth century, cementing their subaltern position in the international division of labour.

During decades of global crisis (1914–1948), Latin America saw battles between an oligarchy that violently sought to make the working class pay the price of the economic meltdown and a left-wing tendency boosted by two processes: the growing peasant and trade union organisations on the one hand, and a radicalised middle class on the other. Observing the new forms of material dispossession that made the promises of republican democracy impossible, peasant and worker organisations advanced a discourse highlighting class conflict and patriarchal and neo-colonial domination. They also voiced new visions of the nation state and the perspectives for democratic and socialist internationalism against the unfolding fascism, inspired by the mobilisations and transformations of public power achieved by the Mexican Revolution and the Russian Revolution.

The fight for equality and liberation under the leadership of working people is ongoing in the anti-imperialist struggles of our time. In a myriad of ways, women powerfully shaped and continue to shape this struggle against

oligopolistic, patriarchal, racist, and neo-colonial capitalism. In the *Women of Struggle, Women in Struggle* series of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, we present the stories of women in struggle who contributed not only to the wider arena of politics, but who also pioneered the establishment of women's organisations, opening up paths of feminist resistance and struggle throughout the twentieth century.

Praxis, as a knowledge of theory and of organisational methods of struggle as they change and respond to history, gives sustenance to ongoing struggles to face oppression. As militants, we study the diverse organisational methods of these women not only to better understand their political contributions, but also to inspire us as we build the organisations necessary for our fight against oppression and exploitation today.

In this third study, we discuss the life and legacy of Nela Martínez Espinosa, an Ecuadorian fighter for the people. Nela was a writer and communist activist¹ from an early age with extensive internationalist experience. As the first woman elected to Ecuador's parliament, she created one of the country's first mass women's political organisations in 1938 and, as the first woman minister of the interior,

¹ Translator's note: In this text, *militante* in the original Spanish is translated as 'activist' or 'party member'. In Spanish, *militante* is commonly used to refer to someone who is part of an organisation and is fully committed and does not carry the connotation of armed struggle as in some parts of the world.



she was effectively in charge of the country in the chaotic three days that followed the insurrection known as *La Gloriosa*, or the Glorious May Revolution, in May 1944.

Nela's rich life-long activism teaches us about the history of women in local, national, and international struggles that linked women's rights with anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist struggles throughout the twentieth century. In a speech at Ecuador's National Congress in 2003 (a year before her death), Nela spoke about becoming the first woman legislator in 1945:

I came [to the parliament] for the first time in a trance of my love for this homeland, which is still struggling with itself, but by then had been rescued from a dictatorship that intensified its oppression. Those of us who experienced the dangers of demanding a revolution which was subsequently denied to us were simply moved. A woman in Congress among those who spoke and not simply among those who listened? Those who ruled inherited the colonial way of thinking and acting [...] which during the colony destroyed the culture [...] of indigenous peoples to the point of becoming part of the norm, the way of life for those who later became the leaders of the republic. The practice that we are speaking of persisted in social norms and especially behaviour. That is why my presence was strange in the National Congress and,

on welcoming it, political leaders for the first time also recognised women citizens in the upper echelons of power.

Early Years

Nela Martínez was born into a landowning and very religious family in 1912 in Cañar, a small town sheltered by the Andes in southern Ecuador. Her father, César Martínez, was a member of the Conservative Party. Her mother, Enriqueta Espinosa, was an educated woman with liberal tendencies who instilled a love of reading, knowledge, and culture in her fifteen children.

During her childhood, Nela grew close to the children of the indigenous workers on her father's landed estate, who were subjected to the economic and racial exploitation inherited from the colonial period that continued in the republican era following independence from Spain. 'Hence my devotion to indigenous issues', Nela told Tania Laurini. 'When I was very young, I saw that the world of indigenous peoples was very far removed from the world of landowners. Indigenous people were there, involved in everything, but were absent at the same time'. At the age



of ten or eleven, Nela took part in a protest against her father carried out by indigenous farmworkers.²

At age twelve, Nela entered the Colegio de los Sagrados Corazones Catholic boarding school in the southern city of Cuenca. It was during this stage of her young adolescence that she first came into contact with revolutionary texts. The journal *Amauta*, edited and published by José Carlos Mariátegui in Lima (Peru) was one of the first revolutionary texts that she read. She spent the pocket money her family gave her on books and studied Andean socialism. She returned to her hometown in 1927 without a diploma, since women at that time were not allowed to graduate.

The Liberal Revolution and the Crisis of the Radical Liberal Project

The Liberal Revolution of 1895, led by General Eloy Alfaro, had begun the arduous process of shaking the foundations of the landowning conservative state in Ecuador. This state was characterised by the subordination of the republic to the transnational church,

² Tania Laurini, 'Ser mujer y rebelde nunca fue fácil' [Being a woman and a rebel was never easy], *Explored*, 9 March 1992, <https://hoy.tawsa.com/noticias-ecuador/nacer-en-1912-ser-mujer-y-ser-rebelde-nunca-fue-facil-61358.html>.

ensorship of the press and of the political representatives of the Ecuadorian Radical Liberal Party (PLRE) and radicalism, and the subjugation of servile indigenous communities in the Sierra region propelled by the dispossession of their ancestral land.

These new political horizons mobilised broad rural strata, urban masses, and even marginal sectors of the bourgeoisie. Successful coordination between these groups underpinned the military victory that marked a new course of state-building – one that was opposed to that of the traditional ultra-conservative and clerical landowning party. The impact of the liberal boom permeated the state and shaped the social identities of progressive sectors in the following decades. However, economic expansion based on cocoa production and export, as well as the financial and commercial dependence of Ecuadorian elites on foreign trade, characterised an even more pronounced oligarchy during the global crisis following World War I.

The political hatred of conservatives and the internal disputes within the PLRE led to the brutal assassination of Eloy Alfaro by a lynch mob in 1912. This incident did not put an end to the liberal regime, but it did initiate a period of recomposition of its internal forces. A new alliance between the oligarchs of the coastal region of the country – associated with commerce and banking – and the incipient bourgeoisie embedded in the structures of the PLRE caused the most progressive and revolutionary





Plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ecuador in Quito in 1947. Three women were part of the meeting, seated from left to right: Luisa Gómez de la Torre, Dolores Cacuango, leader of the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians, and Nela Martínez Espinosa.

Source: M. Wengerow / Martínez-Meriguét Archive

sectors of the workers, peasantry, and indigenous communities (best represented by Alfaro's tendency) to react and question liberal hegemony.

The 1922 Guayaquil General Strike: The Power of Class-Conscious Organisations

Faced with growing inequality and the resulting popular discontent, the liberal government resorted to more violent and assiduous repression. In the port city of Guayaquil, home to the largest working-class population in the country, a successful general strike broke out, bringing together the demands of numerous professional sectors and the industrial proletariat. After the city was completely paralysed for days, the liberal government sent in the army to crush the strike, resulting in the massacre of hundreds of people on 15 November 1922. Joaquín Gallegos Lara immortalised this massacre of workers in his novel *Las cruces sobre el agua* ('Crosses on the Water'), alluding to the corpses floating in the Guayas River.

Far from quelling discontent, this brutal episode radicalised the most organised and revolutionary sectors of the working class. In a context of growing class conflict,



the repression cemented new political players who were emerging in the struggle. This included the indigenous movement, the peasant movement, the nascent industrial proletariat, and women, all of whom were previously deprived of political power and representation by the state and the oligarchy.

Some of these new figures presented a radical critique of the liberal project's loss of direction. On the one hand, radical groups within the PLRE questioned the new alliances with the commercial and financial oligarchy and eventually joined the Ecuadorian Socialist Party. On the other hand, indigenous and peasant communities that had been dispossessed of land and were experiencing increasing pressure from powerful landowners (whether conservative or new landowners allied with the liberal elites) intensified their demands for political recognition from the liberal state. Thirdly, the urban working masses (the new industrial proletariat) developed new tools for organisation and struggle through the newly created sectoral and local trade unions, a process in which the Communist Party of Ecuador played a crucial role. Other sectors dissatisfied with the liberal regime fed into the progressive opposition, including broad sectors of teachers, young intellectuals, and progressive sectors of the army.

The Communist Party of Ecuador (PCE) was formed in 1931 from a split in the Ecuadorian Socialist Party

(PSE), founded in 1926. The dispute over whether or not to join the Third International was the final chapter in the growing difference of opinion between PSE leaders not only in the doctrinal and ideological spheres, but also in terms of organisation and tactics. After its formation, the PCE joined the Comintern.

The PSE had been a key player in the state reforms implemented through the newly formed Ministry of Social Security and Labour. These included redistributing land to indigenous communities; outlawing bonded labour on landed estates; enshrining labour rights; and ensuring representation of the working class, indigenous people, teachers, and public servants in the Senate. Despite their commitment to intervention from within the structures of the state to bring about radical democratic reform, the socialists were unable to contain the pressure from the elites to repress autonomous working-class organisations. Reformist aspirations for social justice, political representation, social and political rights, and the recognition of ancestral rights (in the case of indigenous sectors) were included in the 1928 Constitution, and socialist cadres and lawyers played a key role in putting these reforms into law.

Meanwhile, the PCE played an active role in organising both the urban and rural working class. Aware of the importance of strengthening organised action among the working class in order to fulfil the rights enshrined in the



new Constitution, the communist leadership proposed working closely with the indigenous communities of the central highlands and the dispossessed peasant sectors; promoted links between sectors of the working class to strengthen solidarity between collectives and in the organisation of strikes both at the local level and in the trade union and professional sectors; and was key in the battle of ideas, developing a strong, critical press.

As an incipient political organisation, the PCE organised itself into local cells made up of a few members who were very active and well-connected between regions. This structure allowed party members to create links with a wide range of organisations of various kinds, including indigenous communities in the centre and north of the highlands and the coastal region, trade unions, and other associations. Some estimates suggest that the Party organised up to 600,000 peasants in 1943.³ The Communist Party's militant grassroots work from 1941, side by side with trade unions and peasant organisations in workplaces, communities, and gradually in institutions (often in coordination with the PSE, which had a greater number of cadres and institutional representation) placed it at the forefront of the efforts to gather the forces that would participate in the 1944 insurrection known as *La Gloriosa*, or the Glorious May Revolution.

³ Valeria Coronel, *El Estado Indoamericano: reforma, democracia y socialismo en el Ecuador de entreguerras* [The Indo-American State: Reform, Democracy and Socialism in Interwar Ecuador] (Quito: FLACSO, Colección Atrio, 2022 [forthcoming]).



Class in one of the bilingual schools for indigenous people, created by the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians in Cayambe, which Luisa Gómez de la Torre and Nela Martínez helped form.

Source: Blomberg / Martínez-Meriguet Archive

Activism First: Trade Unions, the Communist Party of Ecuador, and the Ecuadorian Indigenous Federation

In 1930, Nela Martínez visited Guayaquil with her mother. There, she met with Joaquín Gallegos Lara, which would change both of their lives forever. At the age of 21, Joaquín was already an established writer linked to the trade union world and a member of the Communist Party. Nela discovered a lifelong bond of shared activism with Gallegos, or a 'love of the collective future', as she put it.

In 1933, Nela moved to Ambato, a city in the central highlands, and got a modest job as a teacher. That year, she joined the Communist Party as the only woman in the local cell and began her political activity through intense grassroots organisational work with workers and peasants. During this period, she established relations with several trade unions, published radical revolutionary texts, and organised protests and demonstrations. The physical distance between Nela and Joaquín did not prevent their relationship from becoming increasingly intimate on a personal level and more committed on a political level. For years, their correspondence was the mainstay of their love affair and the vehicle for the fruitful exchange of political ideas that enriched the dialogue between the highlands and the coastal region. In one of

the letters that Nela wrote to Joaquín at the age of 19, she expressed her position on the situation of women, referring to her father's attempt to marry her off to the son of a landowner:

He wants to trap me in the unconsciousness of the everyday routine, to make an irony of my thoughts – the few that he knows of me – as I resign myself to the reality of what I should be. He wants to give me a Catholic husband so that neither my children nor future generations will change, so that I too will be what my mother is, what the wretched women of this world are: the woman/victim, the woman/thing, the woman/slave. My flat refusal has exasperated him.⁴

Nela's father never looked kindly on her relationship with Joaquín. Despite his objections, they married in Ambato in 1934. Shortly afterwards, Nela and Joaquín moved to Guayaquil, fleeing political persecution by the local authorities. Nela's reputation as a communist activist, trade unionist, and agitator prevented her from getting a stable job. Despite the difficulties, the couple remained very politically active, working in both the highlands and the coastal region. Their role as leaders and organic intellectuals of the Communist Party – forging links and

⁴ Letter from Nela Martínez to Joaquín Gallegos, 2 January 1932. N-19320102, Collection of letters between Nela Martínez Espinosa and Joaquín Gallegos Lara. Martínez Meriguet Archive, Quito.



alliances with different sectors of the working class and the intelligentsia – was key to overcoming the sectoral and regional divisions that would make the united action of the working class possible.

In 1935, the PCE sent Nela to Quito to meet with different political sectors in the country. She decided to settle in the capital, and Joaquín followed her there shortly afterwards. Their relationship deteriorated and they ended up living separately, although they continued their marriage and political work.

That same year, Joaquín wrote the first chapters of a seminal work of Ecuadorian literature, *Los Guandos*, a moving account of the dispossession and subjugation of the indigenous people of the highlands, the brutality of the system of domination imposed by the landowning class, and the contradictions of modernisation. The novel, written jointly by Nela and Joaquín, is based on the violent exploitation of indigenous people that Nela witnessed in her childhood and youth. In a 1930 letter to her, Joaquín describes it as ‘An indigenous book. The first indigenous book that will have been made in our Ecuador. A new book. But it will not be my name alone that appears. We will write and publish it together’.⁵ Decades later, in the 1980s, Nela would finish writing and publish the text,

⁵ Letter from Joaquín Gallegos to Nela Martínez, 23 November 1930. Document J-19301123, Collection of letters between Nela Martínez Espinosa and Joaquín Gallegos Lara. Martínez Meriguet Archive, Quito.

Meriguet which had remained unfinished when Joaquín died in 1947. The work forms part of the Ecuadorian literary style known as *indigenista*, in which non-indigenous authors write about indigenous people, seeking to defend them in the context of the struggles to recover their national legacy.⁶

After attempting suicide, Joaquín decided to return to Guayaquil in 1936 accompanied by his mother, who had always looked after him since he was an infant born with an illness that prevented him from walking. This new separation turned out to be definitive; Nela wrote to Joaquín expressing her wish for a divorce. However, the end of their marriage did not prevent them from continuing to share their activism and lives up until Joaquín's death. After the divorce, Nela continued her political work in the Communist Party and began a relationship with Ricardo Paredes, its first secretary general and the architect of the split with the PSE. She went on to raise their son alone, as Paredes, who was married, refused to get a divorce. As a single mother, Nela had to face the condemnation of a deeply conservative society, which she confronted from day one by walking openly in the street with her son.⁷ She went to live with her friend Luisa Gómez

⁶ Translator's note: *indigenista* from *indigenismo* refer to a broad movement covering politics, social sciences, literature and the arts, concerned with the status and problems of *indigenous* peoples in Latin American societies.

⁷ Nela Martínez and Ximena Costales, 'Yo siempre he sido Nela Martínez Espinosa. Una autobiografía hablada' [I Have Always Been Nela Martínez Espinosa: A Spoken Autobiography] (Quito: Universidad Nacional de Educación, 2018).



de la Torre, also a teacher and PCE member, who helped her look after her son for a decade.

During those years, Nela was closely involved in the formation of the Ecuadorian Indigenous Federation (FEI), the first national organisation representing indigenous peoples in Ecuador. The FEI was formed in 1944 from various unions and organisations that had existed since the 1920s, which had fought against brutality towards indigenous peasants working on land owned by white Ecuadorians, demanding effective equality, the right to land, and to their identity. In 1930, a strike was organised at the Pesillo estate (located in Cayambe, in the highlands), which would become the founding event of the federation. The Communist Party was involved in this and subsequent mobilisations. It was in this process that Nela met indigenous leader Dolores Cacuango, known as 'Mama Dolores de los indios' ('Mother Dolores of the Indians'), a key figure in the indigenous movement and the PCE.

Since Dolores Cacuango was illiterate, Nela acted as her secretary. During this period, Nela deepened her awareness of the importance of education as an emancipatory tool and process. As early as 1940, Dolores, Nela, and Luisa began to set up bilingual schools so that indigenous children could have a proper education. The schools were designed to educate children with the hope that they would then become not only teachers, but also leaders

and activists, which would support the creation of tools to support popular mobilisation.

The FEI was founded by these indigenous groups that had mobilised as well as by some white and mixed-race Ecuadorians. There were many communist activists in both groups, evidence of the close relationship between the FEI and the PCE that existed since the FEI's founding.

The Anti-Fascist Struggle and the Ecuadorian Women's Alliance

From the 1930s, Nela Martínez was involved in the Ecuadorian anti-fascist, anti-totalitarian movement resisting the influence of Italian and Spanish fascists as well as German Nazis. The Nazi agenda was widely disseminated on the radio and in Ecuadorian universities, and German Nazi sympathisers had a strong business presence in the country, particularly in the oil industry. SS officers directed the operations of independent German spies and military strategists close to the Ecuadorian president's office, who consulted them on how to structure the government and the army. General Franco's fascist government was also influential in Ecuador through its ties with the Conservative Party. However,



there was also a movement for a free Spain composed of Spaniards and Ecuadorians who opposed fascist Spain as well as various anti-fascist groups who collaborated and communicated with the British and Soviet governments in particular.

In 1941, the Anti-Totalitarian People's Movement of Ecuador (MPAE), a left-wing anti-fascist organisation, was set up in Quito, mainly driven by the French anti-Nazi activist Raymond Meriguet. Nela, who became the secretary of organisation and propaganda for the MPAE, wrote about anti-fascism in various media and called for mobilisation in the popular assemblies organised by the movement. The assemblies saw anti-fascist activists of various tendencies – both Ecuadorians and foreigners – build unity against collaboration with the Axis powers. In 1942, Nela became the secretary of the MPAE's Women's Section.

As a member of both the central committee and the executive committee of the Communist Party, Nela firmly believed in the need for grassroots organisational work. Her involvement in this task challenged the party structures on more than one occasion, especially with regard to the active participation of women. As early as 1931, in a letter to Joaquín, she wrote:

The socialist ideology can only discover complete triumph in the idiosyncrasy of women by channelling

them into its movement... Who are the first to launch their anathema against the new woman? To criticise her, to slander her, and to put up impossible barriers to her redeeming acts? Men.⁸

Based on the legitimacy she built through years of grassroots activism and her influence on public debate through articles in the press, Nela contributed to broadening spaces of unity and coordination, particularly with indigenous sectors and women. She supported the formation of autonomous organisations that would allow these excluded sectors' voices to be heard. She was also aware of the importance of engaging other prominent regional communist leaders and activists in these spaces of unity.

Although women had significant participation and even leadership roles in working-class struggles in Ecuador, this was not reflected in the leadership of political parties. During her trip to Quito in 1935, Nela learned of the existence of right-wing and religious women's organisations, but none that brought left-wing women together. So, she put into practice her vision of uniting all women from left-wing parties and different backgrounds to fight for common causes and participated in the founding of the Ecuadorian Women's Alliance (AFE) in 1938. This

⁸ Letter from Nela Martínez to Joaquín Gallegos, 1 January 1930. Document N-19300101, Collection of letters between Nela Martínez Espinosa and Joaquín Gallegos Lara. Martínez Meriguet Archive, Quito.



was a broad and diverse platform of women from different social and political sectors, including progressive liberals who had fought for the right to women's suffrage; indigenous leaders such as Dolores Cacuango; communists such as Nela; socialists; and workers and women from neighbourhood committees. Nela soon became general secretary and president of the organisation, which sought to further women's political autonomy in order to express themselves in the national political sphere.⁹

The AFE's philosophy included 'equal economic, social, and political rights for all Ecuadorian women'. Ecuadorian women were the first in the region to secure the right to vote in 1929. As a result, this demand was not a focus of their political agenda as it was in the rest of the region in the 1930s and 1940s. The women of the AFE sought to unite all women's forces (*fuerzas femeninas*) around the defence of women and the transformation of the entire country. They initially combined political struggle with social welfare campaigns, though these campaigns soon became political bodies of mutual support promoting the collectivisation of reproductive and care duties. This was the case with the creation of community kitchens, various workshops, and literacy training for women incarcerated in the García Moreno

⁹ Tatiana Salazar-Cortez, 'Una lectura a la versátil militancia de la Alianza Femenina Ecuatorana, 1938–1950' [A reading of the versatile activism of the Ecuadorian Women's Alliance, 1938–1950], *Trashumante. Revista Americana de Historia Social*, no. 11 (2018): 164–186.

prison in Quito. The organisation was strengthened by the struggle for women's labour rights in the midst of the national debate on the new Labour Code (1938), when it fought for equal pay for equal work, job security during pregnancy, maternity leave, and the creation of nurseries. Although they did not put it in such terms, at the time Ecuadorian women were already thinking about politics in terms of gender disparities.¹⁰

As an organisation allied but not subject to the Communist Party structure, the AFE functioned until 1950, mainly in Quito, but it also sought to carry out activities in other parts of Ecuador and even abroad, with delegates in the US.

¹⁰ Tatiana Salazar-Cortez, 'La experiencia militante de la Unión Revolucionaria de Mujeres del Ecuador (URME), 1962-1966' [The militant experience of the Revolutionary Union of Ecuadorian Women (URME), 1962-1966], MA diss., Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2017a.



The Glorious May Revolution (1944)

Carlos Alberto Arroyo del Río, who became the president of Ecuador in 1940, was a representative of the new international financial elite that sought to reposition the power of capital over the reformist states of Latin America. This elite intended to put the brakes on the redistributive policies of taxation, nationalisation of strategic sectors, and the expansion of labour rights adopted by several states in the region (Ecuador and Mexico, among others) in the 1930s.

Left-wing opposition in the struggle against the return of the oligarchy was united by a number of factors: Arroyo del Río's reactionary line, which went against the 1928 and 1938 constitutions; his enmity towards public employees in the national education sector and the universities; and his attacks on previously secured land and labour rights, together with the use of repressive force.¹¹

In July 1941, Peru invaded Ecuador from the south and seized an area of Amazonian territory equivalent to almost half of the country. At the root of the conflict were the interests of European and North American companies in the rich oil deposits in the area. The conflict ended, the plunder confirmed by the 1942 signing of the Protocol of Rio de Janeiro, which established new borders. The Arroyo del Río government's handling of

¹¹ Coronel, *El Estado Indoamericano*.



Meeting of the Ecuadorian Women's Alliance (AFE) at the Workers' House, Quito. Seated at the centre is Nela Martínez and standing, first on the right, is Luisa Gómez de la Torre.

Source: Pacheco / Martínez-Meriguet Archive

the conflict was regarded as treason at a critical moment of the national mobilisation against the oligarchic government.

In the short period between 1943 and 1946, the process of building the autonomous power of Ecuador's popular organisations accelerated. While in previous years efforts had been made to mobilise and organise the working class at the local level and on a sectoral basis, the priority now was to form alliances at the national level, seeking an accumulation of forces that would effectively confront the dominant blocs in the political and economic sphere. On the one hand, there was the Ecuadorian Workers' Confederation (CTE), a broad alliance of trade unions and peasant organisations from all over the country. The CTE was the result of a long process of drawing up alliances and creating spaces for united action. On the other, there was the aforementioned Ecuadorian Indigenous Federation.

The revolutionary forces of the left, with the PCE on the frontlines, promoted the creation of a national front through their commitment to a national reconstruction project that would overcome feudal structures and boost the productive forces on the path to socialism. They not only called on the socialist and communist left, but also on the liberal followers of former President José María Velasco Ibarra and 'conservative democrats' to join them. They sought to fight the authoritarianism of Arroyo del

Río; confront the crisis of the oligarchy and the threat of fascism; and advance the programme of national industrial development and the defence of democracy.

A result of these efforts was the formation of Ecuadorian Democratic Alliance (ADE), a coalition that included the conservative, independent radical liberal, socialist, and communist parties, as well as the National Democratic Front and Ecuadorian Revolutionary Socialist Vanguard platforms. The ADE drafted a programme that included the historical demands of excluded sectors and consolidated united action towards national reconstruction. The programme demanded popular democracy; guaranteed freedom of organisation and of the press; proposed economic organisation to increase productive capacity in both industry and agriculture; pledged to improve the living standards of the working class and peasantry and establish a living wage; advocated for the full ‘integration of indigenous peoples and the Montubio’; promoted access to education; called for the democratisation the Armed Forces; and encouraged continent-wide collaboration against fascist forces.¹²

It was in this context that a major uprising took place on 28 May 1944 against the Arroyo del Río government, organised through the ADE and led by the popular forces: workers, students, indigenous people, and

¹² Translator’s note: The Montubios are an ethnic minority of mixed ancestry from the coastal region of Ecuador dedicated to agricultural work.



women. On 29 May, President Arroyo took refuge in the Colombian Embassy. The national police then visited the ADE headquarters to indicate that they would not attack, though they would defend themselves if necessary. Finally, the military recognised the right to rebellion and the ADE leadership. Nela Martínez identified the power vacuum and decided to occupy the Government Palace accompanied by students, where she served as the minister of the interior and led the country for three epic days.

From the Ministry I ordered the release of prisoners, mainly those of the anti-fascist movement, who were in different provinces or imprisoned in the East for fighting against the Arroyo del Río regime. The whole country was informed that ADE had taken over the Presidency of the Republic; we asked that local governments be organised to prevent the counterrevolution from acting – although that term is not precise. I ordered what had to be done: the coordination of all activity on a national scale.¹³

When José María Velasco Ibarra – who was in the north of the country at the time of the uprising – finally arrived and directly installed himself in power instead of calling elections, Nela realised that the popular revolt had been betrayed and left the palace without accepting a

¹³ Nela Martínez and Ximena Costales, 'Yo siempre he sido Nela Martínez Espinosa'.

government post. Velasco immediately closed the public office where she worked, leaving her unemployed.

A constituent assembly made up of representatives of workers and previously excluded social sectors enacted a new constitution in 1945. This enshrined social rights in favour of the working class and indigenous people, subordinating private property to the public interest and recognising ancestral rights to community land. The new constitution also guaranteed parliamentary representation for workers, indigenous people, educators, and other previously excluded sectors through the ‘functional system’ of voting.

Led by Nela, AFE women sought formal political representation in the Constituent Assembly, which they had to fight for despite already having the right to vote and having actively participated in *La Gloriosa*. At the assembly held at the Ecuadorian Workers’ Confederation headquarters to nominate candidates for the Constituent Assembly, communist leaders conspired to ensure that the candidacy for assemblywoman did not go to Nela, despite the support she enjoyed. However, this did not stop her: she ran as a substitute assembly member and won the seat. She finally substituted the main assembly member and became Ecuador’s first woman legislator in 1945. This was perhaps the first major internal battle that Nela had to fight against the very clear gender discrimination of her own PCE comrades.



Ibarra took advantage of the infighting in the multi-party, cross-class ADE and manoeuvred to abolish the 1945 Constitution and proclaim himself dictator in 1946. Though the counterrevolution he led helped consolidate the power of conservative sectors within the state, it did not immediately weaken the momentum of the popular organisation that had built up over the previous two decades.

An Internationalist Communist Activist

After the defeat of the popular forces in May 1944, Nela distanced herself completely from the government and devoted many years to the internationalist struggle. On a long tour of several Central American countries that began with an invitation to the Inter-American Congress of Women in Guatemala in 1946, Nela clandestinely helped restructure the country's communist party, which had been banned by the dictatorship, and founded the Women's Alliance (*Alianza Femenina*), a national women's organisation. In Honduras and Nicaragua, she experienced the repression of communist activists first-hand. In Costa Rica and Panama, Nela came into contact with communist parties that were more organised and able to participate in their countries' politics. In Colombia, she

played an important role in establishing the Women's Alliance in the country.

In 1949, Nela began a year-long stay in Europe. She travelled to Paris as a representative of Ecuadorian communist women, invited by the International Women's Federation, where she contributed to the organisation of the First World Peace Congress. She was then invited to take part in the international gathering of communist women held in Moscow. This trip enabled Nela to meet communist leaders and activists not only from various European countries but also from Cuba, which was a stopover on her transatlantic journey. She strengthened these ties even further after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

After her travels, Nela returned to her activism in the Communist Party and the AFE. Together with Dolores Cacuango, Luisa Gómez de la Torre, and other communist activists, she worked on the consolidation of indigenous schools in Cayambe in the following years.

In 1950, Nela married French communist and anti-fascist activist Raymond Meriguet, one of the founders and secretary general of the Anti-Totalitarian People's Movement of Ecuador (MPAE). Meriguet had settled in Ecuador in the 1930s and the two had known each other since the creation of the MPAE. They had three children together and shared their lives and activism until Meriguet's death in 1988.





Speech by Nela Martínez at the First Congress of Working Women in Quito, 1956.

Source: Pacheco / Martínez-Meriguet Archive

The Revolutionary Union of Ecuatorian Women

In the 1950s and 60s, the PCE faced great tension over the questions of armed struggle and the participation of women and youth in the party. Stalin's death in 1953 called into question the 'cult of the leader'. In 1959, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution sparked heated debates about armed struggle. The PCE, which at its 1962 Congress defined armed struggle as the road to revolution, in 1964 ultimately disciplined and expelled party members who had organised an attempt to create a guerrilla force in 1962 with the mass front of the party's youth, the Revolutionary Union of the Ecuatorian Youth (URJE).

Between 1954 and 1955, three projects to create a women's organisation were presented to the PCE Central Committee, two of which were proposed by the party's National Women's Commission (most likely drafted by Nela Martínez and Luisa Gómez de la Torre): the Organisation of Democratic Women and then the Democratic Federation of Ecuatorian Women. For their part, Pedro Saad and Rafael Echeverría of the PCE Central Committee presented the Organisational Plan for Work among Women. The Democratic Union of



Ecuadorian Women was created, though there is very little information available about it today.¹⁴

In an incident often referred to as ‘internal clashes with members of the Central Committee’, the details of which are largely unknown, Nela was suspended from the PCE in 1957.¹⁵ In the following years, she dedicated herself to feminist organising and solidarity with refugees fleeing from various dictatorships on the continent in addition to caring for her three young children.

The PCE maintained its alignment with the USSR as well as its position of creating alliances with the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie so that it could participate in elections. From this period on, the PCE harshly criticised the Chinese Communist Party on several occasions; it also expelled several party members who were labelled ultra-leftists. In 1964, a group of cadres and activists split from the PCE to create the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Ecuador, a Maoist tendency. Over time, the PCE gave women a greater (albeit still limited) role in the party, propelled by the influence of women leaders of the Cuban Revolution and the creation of the Federation of Cuban Women, as well as Vietnamese women guerrillas. The party understood that the role of women, like that of all members, was

¹⁴ Tatiana Salazar-Cortez, ‘La militancia política femenina en la izquierda marxista ecuatoriana de la década de los sesenta: La URME y el PCE’ [Women’s political activism in the Ecuadorian Marxist left of the 1960s: The URME and the PCE], *Procesos: revista ecuatoriana de historia* 46, 2017b.

¹⁵ Ibid.

to participate in class struggle in order to put an end to capitalism. However, the specific problems experienced by women were reduced to the struggle for peace and their role as mothers and, therefore, protectors of children.

The PCE always believed that any women's organisation should be under the tutelage of the Central Committee, both because of the risk of factionalism and because it feared the reformist influence of bourgeois feminism.¹⁶

Though the party was committed to building mass women's fronts, there were no proposals at the time regarding the need to improve women's political representation or the conditions for their participation, nor was the sexual division of labour questioned.

The AFE only functioned until the early 1950s, but many of the women who founded it remained politically active. In 1962, they founded the Revolutionary Union of Ecuadorian Women (URME), strengthening the links with university students and trade unionists that they had established earlier. Its objective was 'the effective liberation of Ecuadorian women that would allow them to exercise their rights as citizens without restrictions or limitations; the real independence of Ecuador, in full exercise of its sovereignty; [and] popular sovereignty

¹⁶ Salazar-Cortez, 'La militancia política femenina en la izquierda marxista ecuatoriana de la década de los sesenta: La URME y el PCE'; Salazar-Cortez, 'Una lectura a la versátil militancia de la Alianza Femenina Ecuatoriana, 1938-1950,' 164-186.



as a political, social, and economic expression of a people whose rights have been systematically ignored or betrayed'.¹⁷

The URME was created without a classic hierarchical structure, organising its work around commissions. The organisation did not identify itself as feminist; in fact, its members rejected the concept outright as bourgeois and reformist, a view generally shared among the Ecuadorian left at the time.

On 8 March 1963, the URME, the United Committee for Peace and Sovereignty, and the Democratic Union of Ecuadorian Women called a meeting on International Women's Day, in which members of the socialist, revolutionary socialist, and communist parties participated in addition to the convening organisations. The meeting was interrupted by an altercation with members of the University Women's Alliance (AFU), an organisation created by the PCE in 1952. According to the URME, its members attended the meeting with the intention of sabotaging it. Following this incident, in March 1963 the PCE announced that Nela was no longer a party member. She was accused of not asking to be reinstated after her suspension in 1957, of having 'an attitude contrary to the party line', and of attacking party leaders. The two other members of her local cell, Primitivo Barreto and Modesto

¹⁷ Statute as cited in: Salazar-Cortez, 'La experiencia militante de la Unión Revolucionaria de Mujeres del Ecuador (URME), 1962-1966'.

Rivera, faced the same situation. Meanwhile, Jaime Galarza and José María Roura were expelled from the party, both accused of being factionalists, with Galarza described as an ultra-leftist and María as a Maoist. According to the leaders of the URME and especially Nela, the conflict lay in the fact that they had refused to allow the women's organisation to be completely under the aegis of the PCE Central Committee. However, Nela and her cell had long-standing differences with the Central Committee over the relationship between the PCE and other political forces, which they believed was influenced by Browderism.¹⁸

Internationally, the URME established formal relations with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a global communist women's organisation created in 1945 that served as the PCE's greatest influence on communist women as well as their demands and forms of organisation until the 1970s. This affiliation was a new source of conflict with the PCE, which considered itself to be the only legitimate representative of the WIDF in Ecuador.

¹⁸ Browderism was a short-lived Marxist tendency that argued for the need for communist parties to make alliances and create cross-class fronts with governments and sectors of the centre and right in order to confront the threat of fascism. Its name derives from that of the general secretary (1930–1945) and chairman (1932–1945) of the Communist Party USA, Earl Browder. This tendency was especially influential in Latin America. Nela Martínez later wrote an article on the subject entitled 'Pedro Saad y el browderismo' ('Pedro Saad and Browderism'), published in *Mañana*, Época III, No. 225, 11 January 1968, p. 16. (cited in Ycaza, 1991).



Nela wrote regularly for *Nuestra Palabra* ('Our Word'), the official publication of URME, founded in 1963. The magazine represented a media milestone of the Ecuadorian women's movement that not only published articles about the situation of women – including issues such as the double discrimination against Afro-Ecuadorian and indigenous women – but also about the most significant national affairs. The leading article in its first issue stated the organisation's ideology:

NUUESTRA PALABRA comes from a centuries-old silence, from centuries of servitude, from a pain that weighs on us as part of a long-suffering people, the burden of which increases when one is a woman. We have to speak Our Word to express a thought: the liberation of women has to be the work of women themselves. Our voice has been silenced, unheeded, vilified. The hallmark of an unjust society has weighed like a tombstone on the destiny of Ecuadorian women. The survival of patriarchy and feudalism, bourgeois prejudices, and the selfishness of the ruling class extend to all sectors, even to those who, due to their revolutionary character, should be the first to clear the cobwebs from their minds.¹⁹

¹⁹ Nela Martínez and Ximena Costales, 'Yo siempre he sido Nela Martínez Espinosa'.

Nuestra Palabra ceased publication after four issues, when the fifth issue was stopped at the printers following a coup d'état. The military junta that took over began to repress all left-wing organisations, but especially communist ones, officially declaring communism and the PCE illegal. The URME had to go underground, and several activists were forced into hiding or exile. Nela took refuge with her three young children in her mother's home near to her hometown, Cañar.

The URME remained active until 1966 – the same year that the dictatorship ended – beyond the guardianship that the PCE tried to exercise through some of its members. URME members continued to meet and distribute pamphlets of resistance in defence of people detained and persecuted; against US imperialism, clearly reflected in the actions of the military junta; rejecting the blockade against Cuba; and in favour of sovereignty, peace, and world disarmament. They constantly collaborated with other women's organisations such as the Women's Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, the National Women's Front against the Dictatorship, and the Human Rights Commission. The motives for the dissolution of the organisation are unclear.





Women of the Revolutionary Union of Women of Ecuador (URME) in Quito, 1963.

Source: Utreras / Martínez-Meriguet Archive

The Struggle against Dictatorships and Solidarity with the Sandinista Revolution

The Martínez-Meriguet household always welcomed political refugees from the various dictatorships that ravaged Latin America, especially during the 1970s. In 1983, Nela actively participated in the formation of the Women's Continental Front for Peace and against Intervention. She was part of the coordinating committee of this platform to condemn the US interventionist plan both in Ecuador and internationally. The Front was founded in the midst of Latin American international solidarity with Cuba, under a blockade but victorious; Nicaragua, suffering the war imposed by Reagan; Guatemala and El Salvador, immersed in a heroic struggle for the rights of their peoples; Chile, under the cruel dictatorship of Pinochet; and Argentina, with its civic-military dictatorship that disappeared and detained thirty thousand people.

The international meeting ratified four key points:

1. To affirm the solidarity that women build in their daily lives.
2. To build strong and combative anti-imperialism.
3. To require self-determination.



4. To strengthen women's self-esteem and the will to fight against all forms of discrimination, and to build the awareness of the status of women.

During the 1980s, the committee also called on the women of Latin America to recognise and honour South American independence heroine and native of Quito, Manuela Sáenz, given her contributions both as a politician and in the battlefield.

Solidarity with Cuba

In 1977, Nela founded the José Martí Cultural Institute together with other intellectuals. In 1979, after the return to democracy following the last period of dictatorship (1971–1979), Ecuador resumed diplomatic relations with Cuba. Nela returned the Cuban flag that had flown at the Cuban embassy until Ecuador broke off diplomatic relations in 1962 (under pressure from the United States) to the new Cuban ambassador.

She supported the initiative led by Oswaldo Guayasamín to create the National Coordinating Committee for Ecuadorian Friendship and Solidarity with Cuba in 1992, which she chaired for several years. Guayasamín was the most important Ecuadorian painter of the last century,

had close ties to the Cuban Revolution, and was a prominent member of the José Martí Cultural Institute.

Nela also founded the Ecuadorian-Nicaraguan Casa de la Amistad in solidarity with Nicaragua and continued the work of the Anti-imperialist Tribunal of Our America.²⁰

Throughout her life, Nela wrote not only articles and essays, but also poetry and some short stories. Her texts were sometimes published in newspapers, but above all in communist publications and magazines and those of the various feminist and anti-fascist organisations in which she was active. Often (more than a hundred times, as she noted in an interview), she published under pseudonyms. Whenever one of the frequent dictatorships or authoritarian governments in Ecuador discovered that it was her – a communist woman – who was writing under a certain pseudonym, that pseudonym was banned, and she had to invent a new one.

²⁰ Translator's note: *Nuestra América*, or 'Our America', is a construct linked to promoting the regional integration of Central and South America and forging a Latin American identity as a project opposed to European and US cultural imperialism. The concept stems from Cuban national hero José Martí's 1891 essay of the same title.



Opposition to the Military Base in Manta and Plan Colombia

Nela remained active until her final days. In the 1990s, she opposed Ecuador's participation in Plan Colombia, an initiative of the US as part of what it called the War on Drugs but what was in reality another step in its constant attempts at the geopolitical control of Latin America, in this case through the penetration of police forces and armies.

In 2000, as president of the Women's Continental Front for Peace and against Intervention, Nela participated in a lawsuit to oppose the establishment of a US military base in the port of Manta. Though the base was built, it had to be dismantled following the approval in 2008 of a new constitution prohibiting foreign military bases on Ecuadorian territory. Upon receiving the Dr. Matilde Hidalgo de Prócel Award in May 2003, Nela stated:

Colonisation returns. Concretely, the land of the fighter and president Eloy Alfaro is North American today. Manta is a base for ships and implements of war; it is on loan for the new Yankee onslaught. So too is Esmeraldas and all its bay and possibly the Galapagos. We, the survivors, learned – in my case in a convent school – to love the exploits of Bolívar and his armies of patriots. How will we escape this

colonisation? How can we justify ourselves in the face of our cowardice?²¹

In the 1980s, an illness left Nela almost paralysed, but she managed to recover thanks to her enormous efforts that included two years of intense rehabilitation. Despite her illness, she worked hard for the decades that followed. In 2004, already quite ill, Nela travelled to Havana for medical treatment. She died there in July of the same year. Her ashes lie in both Havana and Quito, and she received heartfelt tributes in both countries.



²¹ Speech on receiving this award granted by the National Congress (now the National Assembly) of Ecuador, which bears the name of the first woman to vote in Ecuador (1924), who, in addition to being a pioneer in the struggle for women's suffrage (secured in 1929), was the first woman doctor and the first woman candidate and elected city councilor in the country.



Acknowledgments

This study was conducted by a team composed of Pilar Troya from Tricontinental: Institute For Social Research, historian Valeria Coronel, and Daniela Schroder, and Iván Orosa who were part of the research group on Nela Martínez formed during the 2020 course offered by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and the International Peoples' Assembly entitled 'Marxism and National Liberation'.

This is a joint publication with the Martínez-Meriguet Archive, who we thank for their great openness and for the dedicated collaboration of Nela Meriguet Martínez.



Women, with Nela Martínez in the centre, from various political movements marching in defense of national sovereignty in Quito's Independence Square, 10 August 1993.

Source: Martínez-Meriguet Archive

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LAYLA
AL-ATTAR
1944-

NELA
MARTINEZ
1912-2004

ANNA
JULIA
COOPER
1850-1964

SULAF
JADALLA
1941-2002

1935-1967
FOROUGH
FARROKHZAD

1940-1921
YASMIN

1921-1986
ANDRÉE
BLOUIN

1952-1977
SAIDA
MENEBHI

FUNMILAYO
RANSOME-KUTI
1900-1978

1997-
ALAA
SALAH

VILM
ESPIÑO
1930-2011

1927-2014
SIMIN
BEHBAHANI

1946-2019
BETH
CARVALHO

1923-2007
NAZIHA
AL-DULAIMI

1971-2016
BERTA
CÁ CERES

MARIE
VIEUX-
CHAUVEAU
1916-

1925-1951
Las hermanas
Mirabal

NINA
SIMONE
1933-2003

ASELA
DE LOS
SANTOS
TAMAYO
1929-2020

1920-1980
“
Concebimos la
necesidad de
una conciencia
revolucionaria
y la hemos
logrado.
”

ZILI
XAVIER
PERES
1925-2015

Marielle
presente

1931-2014
YANAHITA
RATEBZAD

1945-1993
RITA
VALBIVIA

1929-2017
EMMA
MASCHININI

MARSHA P.
JOHNSON
1928-

HAYDÉE
SANTAMARÍA
1922-1980

ROSA
PARKS
1907-1994

QIU 秋
JIN 瑾
1975-1907

1795-1856
MANUELA
SÁENZ Y
AZPIROZ
FIRST
LADY

ALEXANI
KOLOTA
1972-

MARIA
BONITA
1911-1938

GODAVARI
PARULEKAR
1907-1996

VARVARA
STEPANOVA
1894-1958

1925-1982



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