

# Roots of Resistance

**Trade Unionists Against Terror:  
Guatemala City 1954-1985**

by Deborah Levenson-Estrada  
University of North Carolina Press. 300 pages.  
\$15.95.

**The Sky Never Changes**

by Thomas F. Reed and Karen Brandow  
ILR Press. 200 pages. \$14.95.

by Jane Slaughter

met authors Karen Brandow and Deborah Levenson-Estrada when we lived in Guatemala in 1986 and 1987. For the most part, we gringos didn't discuss why we were there—we needed a break. But apparently we were all preoccupied with the same question: With the death squads murdering unionists left and right, why does even one person step forward to carry on?

Both of these books, *Trade Unionists Against Terror* and *The Sky Never Changes*, try to answer the riddle. To their great credit, the authors have rejected the facile explanation that poverty-stricken workers were "forced to fight back" in a simple equation: hardship = resistance. Instead, they search for the individual answers that make some say yes and others keep their heads down.

"In post-1954 Guatemala the quest for dignity and a decent life translated into an unusual labor movement," writes historian Deborah Levenson-Estrada. "[Its members were] preoccupied with questions of being." And not-being.

Hundreds of union leaders and members have been murdered, tortured, and disappeared since the U.S.-led military coup of 1954. For much of the last four decades, to accept the post of local union general secretary was to sign your own death warrant.

So why did they do it?

Levenson-Estrada traces the history of urban workers from 1954 through the historic victory of the Coca-Cola factory occupation in 1985, a struggle that won support from all over the world. The details are vivid.

"The Coca-Cola workers forced the state to recognize their union by occupying the factory," she writes. "When the police came with tear gas, as mechanic Pablo Telón tells it, 'We sat down, wrapped blankets around ourselves and then wrapped ourselves around ourselves.

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HENRIK DRESCHER

wrapping arms, and then arms around waists and legs around legs, a regular straw mat. . . . It took them until ten at night to get us out of there because of the way we'd tied ourselves to each other. . . . The thing was not to lose sight of anyone and to count, so that no one disappeared."

Levenson-Estrada discusses the social environment that hatched the unionists. She describes the fragmented urban neighborhoods where people didn't know their neighbors—until there was a disappearance or an earthquake. She pictures the Catholic youth movement that trained many leaders. She describes the complex relationship between urbanized Mayan Indians and ladinos. She notes the importance of soccer in union-building.

She also explores the qualms of those who cut back their involvement after receiving death threats. She chronicles the resentment of leaders who see their followers wavering. Reading this editorial from a union newspaper, you can feel the tension: "What's happening, you with hair on your chest? Do you think trade unionists are fanatics with their meetings, strikes, demonstrations? They aren't! It isn't fanaticism that we struggle for a bet-

ter life, nor is it fanaticism that makes leaders spend all their time and sacrifice so that others get good treatment in the company."

In a remarkable section titled "Life Never Lost: The Cult of Martyrdom and the Reversal of Murder," Levenson-Estrada describes how unionists dealt with the bloodiest time, 1978-1980. "Losing members and not winning battles, the labor movement fought with what it had—its losses," she writes. "Unionists began expropriating and repossessing the deaths of their companions at the hand of the state, which was the state's weapon against them, as their own weapon. They took up their murdered dead, and not arms."

Marcos Antonio Figueroa of the state workers' federation tells of his kidnapping, when he was held in a VW bus specially outfitted for torture. He and his friend Roberto try to talk to the guard: "We used the word *compañero* to address him; after all, he was a state employee." They speak of the cost of living, of the difficulty of clothing one's children. Eventually, their captors feed them: "Since we were tied up, they fed us with their own hands, putting the milk to my lips to drink. . . . I will never forget this, the detectives,

accustomed to kill and maim, consoling someone with an ulcer. Humans have many aspects, and if we take advantage of the good ones . . . we can advance further than we know."

In recounting his experience this way, Figueroa saved the world for himself.

Thomas Reed and Karen Brandow have collected ten oral histories. The profiled unionists run the gamut: factory workers, municipal workers, peasants, housewives, literacy teachers, and scout leaders.

Like Levenson-Estrada, Reed and Brandow refrain from making Guatemalan unionists into cardboard heroes. Instead, the authors acknowledge "all the usual human traits, both positive and difficult."

Not all the oral histories are happy ones. Consuelo Pantaleo took up drinking for a time after her husband was murdered, and now finds it hard to be close to her four children. "They come close to me and ask, 'Mama, do you love me?' And I reply, 'Yes, my child, but get away from me.'"

Still, many of the stories are inspiring. Ernesto, a Mayan peasant organizer, tells how his activist consciousness began: "My family wasn't so badly off that we lacked food every day. There were tortillas at home each day, although perhaps not salt. But there were other families who didn't even have tortillas. . . . My father took us to visit poor people, so poor that you felt pity for them. We gave them something, with a feeling that comes from the heart."

Brandow asks Ernesto whether he was politically inactive after he was forced into hiding. "Never," he responds. "This work gives you life, because life isn't simply a matter of breathing. Rather, life is what one does to feel a part of the people."

These books are not just for old Guatemala hands. They help all of us understand how heroes emerge out of everyday lives—even in the most trying of circumstances. ■

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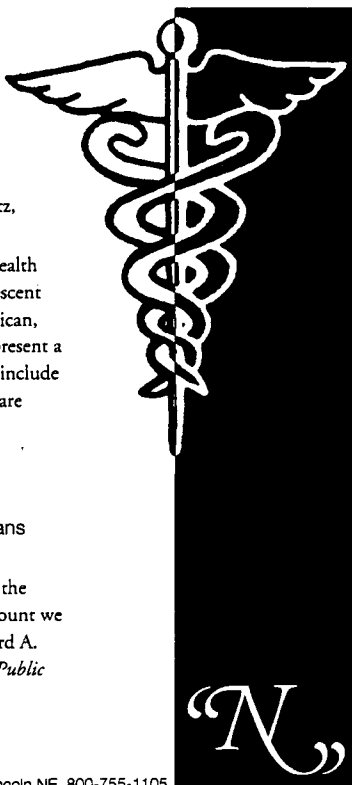
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