

# “A Crisis of Authority”

IN MAY 1967 the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) summoned supervisors, directors, teachers, and students to a national meeting on rural normales, to be held later that summer in Mexico City. Participants would evaluate the problems affecting the countryside’s teacher-training system and propose solutions. In the meeting’s inaugural remarks, Education Minister Agustín Yáñez described the rural normales as “an innovation of the revolutionary regime” and praised the schools that had once produced committed teachers whose spirit of service led to a “heroic period” of education in the countryside. The narrative—a celebration of a revolutionary project whose attention to the countryside had proved transformative—was a familiar one, long repeated by officials, teachers, and students alike. But if the normalistas invoked earlier regimes, especially that of Lázaro Cárdenas, for their commitment to the countryside, SEP officials did so to highlight teachers’ abnegation in service of the nation. Yáñez’s speech proceeded in this latter tradition. Only through “authentic patriotism,” he emphasized, could Mexico relive the achievements of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

Front and center in both the opening remarks and the conference proceedings was the issue of student comportment. Yáñez lamented normalistas’ tendency to approach issues “emotionally rather than thoughtfully.” This

conference, he stated, would offer a chance to mediate that passion with the knowledge of experts. And yet he then proceeded with more of a reprimand than a sage mediation. Students needed to understand, declared the minister, that the social justice they demanded was a quid pro quo: “If you freely accept the benefits of an education that is conditioned to a specific goal, this goal must be fulfilled.” Normalistas should be treating their schools “not as a gold mine of personal privileges but as sites made for work and for the privilege of serving Mexico.” Yáñez specifically criticized collective action for promoting “misguided solidarity” and stifling “genuine liberty”—in this case the individual rights of younger students, whom he charged older ones with manipulating. He concluded with a warning typical of the official characterization of dissent: “The Mexican teacher must be an agent of Mexico, not of foreign interests or, worse, of interests that go against Mexico.”<sup>2</sup> The undersecretary of normal education, Federico Berrueto Ramón, who followed Yáñez, went even further. Normalista demands actually “conspired against Mexico” for, in such a poor country, their myriad petitions detracted attention from the educational needs of others. Declaring accusations of blame useless, Berrueto Ramón—with no apparent sense of irony—proceeded to fault the teachers at rural normales for the system’s shortcomings. “I’ve often asked myself,” he stated, “if the pervasive agitation in our normales results partly from poor teacher leadership.”<sup>3</sup>

Yáñez’s and Berrueto Ramón’s words reflect a common trope regarding state authority vis-à-vis an unruly populace, all the more characteristic of a decade marked by youth mobilization. But there is an additional layer to their critique, one discernible in their disbelief that campesino students were not simply grateful for the chance to attend school and in turn eager to serve the state that had granted them this opportunity. That normalistas demanded school improvements demonstrated a sense of privilege unbecoming of their social class. Since they were unappreciative and, as the authorities saw it, unresponsive to their corresponding duties to study diligently and serve eagerly, the state would do better to channel its resources to the millions of other poor campesinos.

Normalistas, however, did not see school funding as a zero-sum game, at least not one to be played out against members of their own social class. They did not dispute the critical state of rural education, but the causes they identified and the solutions they proposed differed markedly from the SEP’s. While the authorities attributed educational shortcomings to demographic growth, teachers’ lack of commitment, and educators’ poor training, rural normalistas understood them as symptoms of structural problems, including

insufficient spending, educational goals that did not challenge systemic exploitation, and an unequal distribution of wealth.<sup>4</sup> In this conception, social justice measures were not a quid pro quo but necessary policy to right historic wrongs.

This chapter examines these two visions of education. Turning first to the 1967 conference proceedings, it shows education authorities' preoccupation with student-body discipline. While official assessments also addressed matters related to resources, academic programs, and faculty labor conditions, the pervasive attention to students' perceived power at once reveals their persistent activism and the degree to which their actions disturbed the authorities. Concerned about the teacher-training system more broadly, in the spring of 1969, the authorities met again to discuss reform measures. By fall they had implemented a broad set of changes that included increased course requirements, an additional year of study, the separation of normales from their affiliated junior high schools, and new pedagogical methods. Framed as a measure of professional efficiency and meant for all normales, the reform had a particularly drastic effect on rural ones, first because these were the normales that had affiliated junior high schools and, second, because the reform converted fourteen of the twenty-nine into technical agricultural schools.<sup>5</sup> The institutions that once constituted the backbone of rural education were now reduced by half.

That this initiative came on the heels of a decade marked by widespread youthful unrest signaled to rural normalistas an effort to tame their power. Unique among Mexico's student body, campesino students had generally inserted themselves into the terrain of struggle through the framework of justice owed to the countryside. But the latter part of the 1960s had brought them closer to their urban peers, and in concert with them, they organized national actions and experienced state repression. This interaction added an additional dimension to their struggle, one in which they began to consider educational content as a matter of capitalist reproduction. They did not go far with the implications of this analysis. The 1968 student movement and its repression soon overwhelmed their momentum and initiatives. The army's massacre of civilians peacefully demonstrating at Tlatelolco had ripple effects throughout the rural normales. Significantly, these were less related to normalista participation in the events leading up to the massacre or to the fact that state repression moved many to more radical action in the years thereafter. What most connected normalistas to Tlatelolco was the 1969 restructuring of their schools, a measure they experienced as retribution for their generation's crime of rebelling.

## “DISORGANIZED AND ANARCHIC”

The 1967 National Assembly on Rural Normal Education, the first of its kind, is best understood within the context of a renewed plan for education reform. The last major restructuring, the 1959 Eleven-Year Plan, had increased elementary school coverage, expanded general education requirements in junior high and high school, and created more technical training opportunities. Ending illiteracy, having a culturally informed citizenry, and preparing a labor force better equipped for the country's modernizing development had been the SEP's key goals with such changes. "Well intentioned," as one analyst characterized them, the measures focused on the education system as if it operated in isolation from the broader social structure, which rendered them "simple improvisations."<sup>6</sup> Aggravating the problem was the SEP's haste in implementing new reforms, the product of changing presidential administrations, each more concerned with differentiating their own approach from their predecessor's than with productively engaging past ones. Moreover, successful educational overhauls meant retooling teachers—including at normales, where those instructing future teachers would also have to be retrained. "The changes proposed to the 1960–1964 study plan were profound," explained one study, "and even though they were supposed to be implemented in a gradual and progressive manner . . . their content was never applied, both because of lack of time to evaluate the results, and because of a lack of the specific preparation and retraining of teachers at normales. There the 1964 graduating class would have been the first trained in the new approach, and yet by 1969 the decision had been made to once again radically change the 1960–1964 study plan."<sup>7</sup>

At rural normales, these earlier changes had involved reducing the number of academic requirements while increasing agricultural activities, conceiving the curriculum through long-term holistic goals rather than a laundry list of mandated subjects, and improving pedagogical methods through more discussion-based classes and holistic evaluation rather than a numerical grade. The 1967 National Assembly on Rural Normal Education would evaluate these reforms along with six other aspects of the teacher-training project: school governance, institutional supervision, postelementary school restructuring, the academic calendar, professional training, and schools' material needs. An assessment of each of these seven topics was precirculated among the rural normales and would constitute the basis for each panel discussion. Significantly, in a sign of how much student activism had become characteristic of the schools, these evaluations turned continually to normalistas' political

involvement. Characterized as a disregard for hierarchy, excessive power, and an overblown sense of rights, student mobilizations, stated the evaluation, had created a crisis of authority. One assessment made a particularly drastic proposal to address these issues: dorms should be eliminated, and students should instead receive scholarships to find room and board in private homes. All twenty-nine rural normales should be converted into technical agricultural schools for junior high school students. In their stead, six new rural normales—each with the capacity for a thousand students—should be created. Establishing technical agricultural schools, proponents of this measure reasoned, would help curtail migration to the cities by educating students in rural development strategies. Moreover, eliminating the boarding-school component of rural normales would end many of the problems inherent in these institutions, including the wide range in pupils' age (some as young as twelve with older ones in their early twenties), the lack of academic correlation between *secundaria* and the three years of professional training, and the insufficient number of teachers and service personnel—doctors, psychologists, social workers—to provide support for “the psychobiological changes all adolescents go through.”<sup>8</sup>

Such proposals stoked normalistas' worst fears. “Any policy involving the closure of boarding schools is reactionary,” protested the Mexican Federation of Socialist Campesino Students (FECSM). “Only the enemies of public education who dream of turning the teaching profession into a right-wing tool repeatedly focus their attack on our schools.”<sup>9</sup> While creating career paths other than teaching for the children of campesinos was indeed laudable, intelligence documents also speak to the political motivation for eliminating dorms. “Political-ideological control could be applied to scholarships and enrollments, thus ending conflicts such as strikes or work stoppages,” reported Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, then head of Mexico's Federal Security Directorate. This arrangement, he continued, would end the pervasive mobilizations around food rations and dorm conditions.<sup>10</sup>

Invited to attend the 1967 conference, the FECSM understood its presence as a mere formality in a meeting meant to approve rather than debate changes to the system. “A select group of PhDs in pedagogy have summoned us to Mexico City, where we'll be informed that our normales can no longer exist,” declared one normalista flyer protesting the conference.<sup>11</sup> They were not opposed to reform, “but educational experiments take time to bear fruit; until then, we consider it neither just nor revolutionary to mutilate rural normales.”<sup>12</sup> Students' outrage gave the authorities pause, and the SEP soon eliminated the point about restructuring the *secundaria* years from

the conference proceedings.<sup>13</sup> And yet the students were not mistaken in their alarm. Two years later, the SEP implemented a version of this very measure when it converted half of the rural normales into technical agricultural schools.

In the meantime, the meeting proceeded with a discussion of the other six topics. Despite the range of issues, at almost every turn, school officials identified student agitation as a major problem. For example, the first discussion point, school governance, while recognizing the importance of student voices, critiqued their political involvement, frequent and direct appeals to the SEP offices in Mexico City, and repeated moves to oust teachers, staff, or administrators. Recommendations thus sought to channel normalista energies through the proper school governing council, strengthen the director's authority, and handle problematic staff through labor law and union structures rather than in response to student mobilizations.<sup>14</sup> This latter proposition was reasonable, except that it was student protest that brought staff and faculty transgressions to the attention of the relevant authorities. The National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), Mexico's official teachers' union, not only was a longtime ally of the state but wielded immense power within the SEP itself. When it came to inept, authoritarian, or abusive teachers, the SNTE shielded them from normalista protest.

If the first working group sought to strengthen the institutional hierarchy within rural normales, the second, on school supervision, emphasized system-wide hierarchies, namely, SEP oversight of each normal. Rural normales were "disorganized and anarchic" because ministry supervisors had insufficient funding and little reach to gauge pedagogical outcomes. No one evaluated how classes were structured, how students learned, and how instructors taught. As a result, rural normales produced bad teachers. The solution lay in making the system more legible by better delineating supervision and assigning oversight. Recommendations included creating ten regional zones, assigning each to a supervisor who would conduct extensive visits and have the authority to determine and implement changes.<sup>15</sup>

The third commission, charged with evaluating the decade's earlier reforms, produced a bleak assessment. Not only had the new educational norms not been properly applied at rural normales, but to the extent that they had, they were counterproductive. The reforms had generally been conceived for urban institutions, had been precipitously implemented, or could not be applied owing to a lack of staff and resources. Meaningful research or transcendent school projects could hardly be conducted in the outdated labs, bare libraries, and dilapidated workshops of the rural normales. Moreover, agricultural training was so lackluster that it was problematically similar to

hacienda peonage. Students tilled or weeded assigned plots but had no corresponding vision for the land. When it came to teachers, stated the assessment, “student political interests, sectarian politics, as well as personal and union rivalries,” hindered the constructive work of the system’s few effective instructors.<sup>16</sup> As boarding schools, rural normales required greater devotion, and yet teachers were otherwise engaged, since low pay forced them to seek supplemental jobs. Better campus housing, full-time teaching positions, and updated professional training could help ameliorate this problem. Students, for their part, should receive instruction more tailored to the pedagogical reality they would face as teachers, including preparing them for *escuelas unitarias*, the multigrade, single-classroom schools that predominated in the countryside.<sup>17</sup>

The state of the academic calendar, the subject of the fifth working group, was, according to the assessment, another cause of the “anarchy that deformed the character of future teachers.”<sup>18</sup> Again the evaluation posited student power as a major source of the problem. The students, stated the precirculated assessment, pressured teachers to cancel classes for noncivic holidays like the Day of the Dead, Holy Week, Mother’s Day, or regional festivals. Other class disruptions included field trips, school festivities, or anniversary commemorations. Finally, too many students missed class owing to their involvement in the student council, the FECSM’s Committee of Political and Ideological Orientation, or political activities in general. These disruptions were a prime example of the inordinate student power “since student leaders made demands in the name of the entire student body, assuming they’ll automatically gain authorities’ approval.”<sup>19</sup> Some of the blame, continued the evaluation, lay with the teachers and staff, who either coaxed students to request class cancellations or—fearing retribution if they did not succumb to student wishes—were quick to grant requests for unauthorized holidays. To help ameliorate the problem, the commission outlined regulations on scheduled activities, recommended national-level approval for any changes, and advised sanctions for teachers who “incited” students to demand additional holidays. Interestingly, while the precirculated assessment advocated punitive measures for students who violated attendance policies, the conference recommendations focused more on institutional practices and the teachers who enabled them. “Good professional preparation itself inspired youth” to remain in class, the conference proceedings concluded.<sup>20</sup>

The sixth commission assessed teachers’ and students’ professional quality. Instructors, it stated, had high turnover rates, were disillusioned or conformist, and tended to evade their responsibility, while pupils were uncul-

tured, displayed a general disregard for authority, and acted irresponsibly in support of student leaders with unchecked prerogatives. Solutions included purging bad instructors, offering ongoing professional development, and better screening those hired. A similar logic applied to students: officials needed to pay closer attention to the pupils they admitted and to exert greater control over student organizations. Significantly, the committee did note the need for improved facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and workshops so that teachers could have instructional resources.<sup>21</sup>

“The designated amount is never enough,” began the final point, devoted to an economic analysis of life at rural normales. It was not enough for “student services; not enough teachers and staff; not enough to run the agricultural and workshop production of the schools.”<sup>22</sup> These problems, continued the assessment, had existed from the outset because the SEP had never done adequate research and planning. Instead, it had formulated an idealized view of what could be done with the assigned funds—budgets that had not been reassessed in decades. Rather than adjusting plans to fit the funds actually assigned, directors—under student pressure—solicited more money from the SEP. Rural normales had thus developed a paternalistic culture, constantly petitioning the SEP for more rather than taking the initiative to solve their own needs. The committee proposed solutions that fit into three broad categories: a SEP commitment to meet basic student and infrastructural needs, realistic budgets conceived with schools’ input, and teacher-student proposals to better rely on their own productive capacities.<sup>23</sup>

The 1967 conference proceedings reveal much about rural normales, about the SEP’s conception of the problems therein, and about official strategies to address them. Mainly, they should be understood within the framework of modernizing development, in which education served to ease but not transform structural inequality. Despite variations from administration to administration, the SEP’s general approach since the 1940s had focused on modernizing pedagogical techniques, increasing school access, and professionalizing the teaching body. There was indeed an official consensus that the lack of resources affected the academic quality of rural normales as well as a recognition that earlier reforms seeking to make them more like urban normales had been detrimental. Their condition of scarcity, however, was aggravated by teachers’ inability or unwillingness to adhere to the latest pedagogical mandates. With insufficient school inspectors, the SEP could not enforce compliance. Exacerbating these deficiencies, according to the authorities, was the unbridled student power; students’ political commitment, insistence on celebrating folk holidays, and tendency to resort to federal



rather than school authorities undermined the institutional hierarchy and the very resourcefulness that could help address the situation. This latter dynamic especially bewildered SEP officials, who, given the pervasive rural poverty, held that ideal students should “be cognizant of their unbridled privilege, given the living reality of millions of young campesinos . . . and understand their training is made possible through the sacrifice of the people.”<sup>24</sup>

The conference proceedings do not make evident the nature of student participation, though, judging from the more tempered quality of the published recommendations as compared to the precirculated assessments, their presence had an effect. Significantly, their earlier protest had managed to exclude the proposal to restructure rural normales and eliminate their dorms. The extent to which the FECSM’s vision contrasted with that of the education authorities is evident in their discussions and in the proclamation they issued in the two years following the SEP’s 1967 meeting. The Atequiza Declaration, named after the rural normal in Jalisco where students met to discuss the future of their schools, for example, reveals the fundamentally different premise under which the normalistas operated. First, student representatives did not accept the argument that the country had limited resources for education that simply could not keep up with demographic growth. They pointed to the United Nations’ 1963 Conference on Education and National Social Development, which recommended that countries dedicate at least 4 percent of the gross domestic product to education.<sup>25</sup> Mexico’s spending ranged from 1.94 to 3 percent in the latter part of the 1960s.<sup>26</sup> Second, the FECSM objected to the derisive class perspective that framed schooling for the poor as a privilege rather than a right. The resources they sought, asserted one of their declarations, constituted part of “workers,’ campesinos,’ and youths’ historic struggle to achieve structural, social, and economic change for the country.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, the FECSM’s underlying logic was that structural reform was both necessary and possible, an assumption that contrasted with the SEP’s reformist or modernizing approach. This conception of education reform was rooted in the radical example of the 1930s and the renewed sense of possibilities brought about with the 1959 triumph of the Cuban Revolution.

In a new approach, normalistas vowed to begin to “*challenge* the content and orientation of the education” they received.<sup>28</sup> For decades the federation had emphasized material demands and had rarely included course content. This transition meant understanding education as a mode of capitalist reproduction. While the FECSM did not develop subsequent proposals in this regard—likely because the SEP’s elimination of half of their schools

in 1969 forced them into a defensive struggle for survival—the call speaks to a broadening ideological vision and an increasing disjuncture between students' lived experience and their classroom lessons. Here their interaction with Mexico's broader student movement, especially the National Central of Democratic Students (Central Nacional de Estudiantes Democrático, CNED), helps explain this evolution.

#### A SCIENTIFIC, DEMOCRATIC, AND POPULAR EDUCATION

If normalista participation in the early 1960s agrarian struggles of Chihuahua (chapter 5) represented the clearest manifestation of their links to campesinos, their alliance with the CNED exemplified their relationship to the broader student movement. This national organization was short-lived, dominated mainly by youth affiliated with the Mexican Communist Party, and represented an attempt to unite diverse student organizations, harness radical activism, and challenge the hold of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) on worker and peasant unions. With this in mind, the organizers convened their first meeting in Morelia, Michoacán, in 1963. Two hundred and fifty delegates, reportedly representing 100,000 students, gathered at this first congress. Participants began their convention with a minute of silence honoring campesino leader Rubén Jaramillo and rail union activist Román Guerra Montemayor, both recently dead at the hands of the army. Students then invoked the names of prominent political prisoners. This act at once vocalized their solidarity with popular struggles and condemned the PRI's repressive apparatus. To articulate their vision, CNED leaders drew up the Morelia Declaration, a document setting forth three goals: a student alliance with the masses; a demand for popular, scientific education; and the creation of an independent, democratic, and revolutionary student movement.<sup>29</sup>

Their goals speak volumes about the nature of student grievances and the context of the 1960s. In their evaluation of the terrain of struggle, labor's defeat in late 1950s loomed large as the PRI managed to stymie teachers' and rail workers' struggle for independent unions. Schools, ablaze with protest, had picked up the baton. In Guerrero, Puebla, Michoacán, Sinaloa, Durango, and Mexico City, students had mobilized for university autonomy, ousted corrupt or authoritarian state governors, and organized protests against U.S. imperial aggression.<sup>30</sup> An especially significant struggle took place, at the University of Michoacán San Nicolás de Hidalgo (popularly known as Nicolaita), which became a battleground where both the national government and local right-wing forces sought to contain Cardenismo, which had most

recently manifested itself through the former president's outspoken defense of Cuban self-determination specifically and Latin American liberation—from foreign and oligarchic domination—more generally.<sup>31</sup>

While ultimately overwhelmed by the 1968 student movement in Mexico City, the CNED constituted an important attempt to harness radical student activism, unite diverse campus groups, and challenge the Confederation of Mexican Youth, the PRI's youth association. In the five years after its creation, the CNED held two other congresses, organized a National Day of Action in 1967, and in February 1968 convened a march from Dolores Hidalgo in the state of Guanajuato to Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, demanding freedom for political prisoners. The impact of these actions on the power structure was less significant than the individual experience of those who participated in them, many of whom internalized the goals of solidarity with nonstudent sectors or acquired organizing skills they employed long after the CNED dissolved.<sup>32</sup>

For rural normalistas, CNED actions became opportunities to expose the precarious nature of their situation, seek broad student support, and establish connections with schools outside the teacher-training system.<sup>33</sup> The central's articulated goals fit almost naturally with rural normalistas' grievances, which consistently dramatized the condition of schools meant to serve the poor. Normalistas' rural background and propensity to act alongside campesinos, moreover, represented a vivid manifestation of CNED ideals that linked students to popular organizing. In the next few years, the CNED consistently invoked rural normalista rights, defended their schools' dorm structure, and insisted on the poor's right to a professional education.<sup>34</sup>

In April 1967 the CNED programmed a series of nationally coordinated actions specifically calling for the democratization of education, the improvement of student services (dorms, cafeterias, medical care, and scholarships), and freedom for political prisoners. According to *La Voz de México*, the Communist Party newspaper, up to 150,000 students throughout the country, including at all the rural normales, participated in this event through strikes and demonstrations.<sup>35</sup> Other national CNED events involved the February 1968 March for Liberty demanding freedom for political prisoners.<sup>36</sup> Starting out from Dolores Hidalgo, the cradle of Mexico's 1810 war of independence, the organizers evoked Mexico's historic struggles for liberation. Tellingly, the Justice Ministry ordered local agencies to prevent activities associated with the march, and the SEP instructed school directors to expel students who participated.<sup>37</sup> As it had long done, the government conflated the student problem with communist infiltration, thus fanning

hysteria against youth. Rural normalistas who participated speak of the hostilities they endured and their effort to mitigate violent attacks by placing female students at the head of the march, hoping crowds would be less likely to attack women.<sup>38</sup> “There was a whole media campaign saying, ‘Here come the communist students who eat children,’” remembered Alma Gómez Caballero, who, along with a contingent from the normal of Saucillo, participated in the march.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in several places reactionary groups like the Sinarquistas, or PRI-affiliated unions like the National Campesino Confederation, jeered the marchers.<sup>40</sup> With cries of “Long live Christ the King,” “Down with the reds,” “Go back to Cuba,” or “Go back to Russia,” people threw stones, tomatoes, and eggs at the students.<sup>41</sup>

The little tolerance the government showed for the CNED is a testament to its significance. In Valle de Santiago, fifty-five miles from their destination, the military intercepted the 1,800 marchers. Using a train derailment to construct further propaganda against the students, the press reported the incident as student sabotage. The army soon surrounded the marchers, “returning us prisoners,” as one normalista from Roque, Guanajuato, put it, “to the very towns and cities we had just traveled through.”<sup>42</sup>

Since its inception, intelligence agents had characterized the CNED as an extreme leftist group and sent “special inspectors” to its events with instructions to “weaken the association and prevent the organizers from achieving success.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the CNED encouraged the formation of regional student federations, which emerged in Chihuahua, Morelos, Puebla, and Guerrero, thus facilitating coordinated action by students from different types of educational institutions.<sup>44</sup> The CNED, moreover, showed a consistent presence in local normalista struggles, including Palmira’s 1965 effort to oust teachers accused of sexual harassment and that year’s system-wide rural normal strike.<sup>45</sup> Because of such actions, intelligence agents warned, the CNED was poised to take over the leadership at both rural and urban normales, leading to “a total politicization of future teachers, an unfortunate communist fanaticism.”<sup>46</sup>

What intelligence agents painted as communist fanaticism normalista participants saw as a “program of democratic renewal,” as one student leader from Saucillo put it. “We wanted a renewal of normalismo, and we participated in the national movement with that intention, alongside university students from the entire country.”<sup>47</sup> The CNED contributed to a broader normalista engagement with the student movement by spurring connections with other educational institutions. Its national conferences, days of action, and ambitious mobilizations increased the contact students from

different types of schools had with one another and gave rural normalistas an opportunity to compare grievances and establish alliances. The CNED's goals for a scientific, democratic, and popular education echoed many of the FECSM's historic principles. For example, normalistas had long defended secular schooling, identifying the church and the landed elite as the enemies. The CNED updated such notions by pointing to international capitalists as the new power holders in the post-Cardenista order. The confederation's calls for scientific education not only were anticlerical but constituted a vision in which schools created a conscious citizenry rather than a pliant workforce. To be democratic, moreover, educational opportunities ought to not only be expanded but incorporate student voices in their design and execution. Finally, the CNED's call for popular education emphasized connections between the school campus and the factory and the fields. In this latter characteristic especially, it was rural normalistas who could best assist the CNED in putting its ideals into practice. The relationship was thus a two-way street.

Meanwhile, events in Mexico City continued to heat up during the summer of 1968. The escalating state repression generated student fervor and, increasingly, public attention. The growing mobilizations, the students' creative tactics, and the international spotlight on Mexico as it prepared to host the Olympic Games proved too unnerving for President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, who during his September state-of-the-union address condemned restless youth for violating the rule of law and tarnishing Mexico's image abroad. "We have been tolerant to a fault," declared the president, "but everything has its limits." Ominously, he invoked his powers as commander in chief and lauded the military's role in maintaining order.<sup>48</sup> A month later, on October 2, troops opened fire on student demonstrators in the Tlatelolco Plaza, leaving hundreds of civilians dead.

In the months leading up to the October 2 massacre, the rural normalistas issued statements of solidarity with the students, staged walkouts, and protested the government's mounting repression.<sup>49</sup> Rural normalistas had participated in the mobilizations in Mexico City and had been arrested in the government crackdown.<sup>50</sup> But at the rural normales, the aftershocks of the Tlatelolco massacre were slow and uneven. Proceso Díaz, who began his studies at the rural normal of El Mexe, Hidalgo, that fall, remembered students suspending classes: "I was new to political matters and didn't really understand what was happening. I saw the red-and-black flags, for the strike, to mourn the October 2nd massacre. And so with that I felt that something was happening."<sup>51</sup> At other schools such as La Huerta, Michoacán, activities proceeded normally. "October 3rd was our school anniversary," remembered

José Francisco Casimiro Barrera, “so many didn’t even notice [Tlatelolco] because we were busy celebrating.”<sup>52</sup>

But a storm was brewing. In November the SEP temporarily closed seventeen normales, in some cases using the army. Those not closed went on strike in protest.<sup>53</sup> When classes resumed later that month, students noticed the absence of some of their peers. “We knew how involved they were in ’68 and that their participation continued,” recalled Aristarco Aquino Solís from Mactumactzá, Chiapas. “They were expelled since they no longer showed up [to class]. We’d get wind of them occasionally, nothing lengthy nor too precise. . . . I know they ended up in the MAR.”<sup>54</sup> The Revolutionary Action Movement (Movimiento de Acción Revolucionaria, MAR), one of the many armed groups that emerged in the aftermath of 1968, would count on the significant involvement of rural normalistas, many propelled by the closure of their normales or by their expulsion.<sup>55</sup>

The government’s repression at Tlatelolco confirmed an ideological position many already held: peaceful or reformist calls for change were futile. Rural normalistas had, moreover, an important radicalizing precedent in the 1965 attack on the Madera military barracks in Chihuahua. Despite its failure, students celebrated what they saw as a heroic challenge to an authoritarian state. Even before 1968 some rural normalistas furthered the legacy of the September 23 martyrs, by providing support for the Arturo Gámiz Popular Guerrilla Group, that operated in northern Mexico.<sup>56</sup> In the south, Lucio Cabañas, the former head of the FECSM and a graduate of Ayotzinapa, would soon lead an armed guerrilla movement in the coastal state of Guerrero.

As the 1960s drew to a close, rural normalistas, like other students, had experienced a turbulent decade. The Cuban revolutionary process, especially its resistance to imperial attacks; Mexico’s own agrarian mobilizations and the government’s assassination of its leaders, so egregiously personified by the army kidnapping and murder of Rubén Jaramillo and his family in broad daylight on May 23, 1962; and the constant string of student battles in universities throughout the country all fomented youthful agitation and compelled many to act. That the student movement sowed panic in the halls of power is most exemplified by the state terror at Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968. But the government would not rely on brute force alone. In the case of the rural normales, the SEP implemented the measure students had long feared, closing half of their schools. Labeled an education reform by the SEP, the closure was experienced by students as a mutilation of the rural normal system, one that dealt a major blow to the FECSM.

## AN OVERHAUL OF NORMAL EDUCATION

“One of the major results of the recent student disturbances,” stated a U.S. embassy report from Mexico, “was to give new impetus to the problem of education reform.”<sup>57</sup> Despite earlier insistence that communist and other nefarious international forces were responsible for the 1968 student movement, President Díaz Ordaz now expressed that the root cause was an education system in need of profound reform. Accordingly, the president ordered a reassessment of all educational levels with the broad charge to focus on quality over quantity, critical thinking, and the idea that learning was a lifetime endeavor. When it came to Mexico’s teacher-training system, the president decried normales for producing improvised teachers who lacked not only sufficient abnegation but also basic knowledge.<sup>58</sup> Thus, in 1969, when education authorities met in Saltillo, Coahuila, to discuss changes to the country’s normales, improving teachers’ foundational knowledge (*cultura general*) became a principal preoccupation. Broadening cultural knowledge, emphasized Education Minister Yáñez in his opening remarks, would be the foundation on which to render effective the SEP’s imminent reform, whose specific measures included increasing course requirements, adding a year of professional training, rewarding the type of training over years of service, and implementing new pedagogical approaches that privileged active learning by students. Well-rounded teachers would transmit knowledge to their students while linking that knowledge to vocational and professional training through modern teaching methods. Cultured teachers would be moral ones. Their civic concerns would translate into a spirit of service that would counter a situation that had made normales “fodder for anarchy against the country’s institutional order.”<sup>59</sup>

The conference proceedings followed up on some points discussed in the 1967 National Assembly on Rural Normal Education, for example, on the need to draw students specifically interested in becoming teachers rather than those who used the normal as a springboard to other professions. With this in mind, the junior high schools currently linked to normales would be separated, a measure that affected mainly rural normales, whose years of study began with seventh grade. The only other normal with affiliated junior high schools was Mexico City’s National Teachers School. In the latter case, the schools’ jurisdiction was transferred to the Department of Secondary Education, where they were redesignated as regular secundarias rather than feeding schools for the normal. In the case of the former, the change was more dramatic since it not only separated secundarias and normales but

entirely transformed fourteen of the twenty-nine rural normales into technical agricultural schools. This drastic restructuring, according to education officials, was necessary to offer rural youth careers other than teaching. Now under the jurisdiction of the Office of Technological, Industrial, and Commercial Education, these secundarias preserved their dorm structure but would train agricultural technicians, who, it was hoped, would remain in the countryside and use their skills to improve campesino agrarian production.

If the philosophical underpinning of the 1969 education reform was that learning was a lifelong process, the practical one linked critical thinking to technological instruction that would increase economic production. “Learning while doing” and “teaching while producing” became oft-quoted mantras to describe the new pedagogy. While this approach was laudable, stated one independent analysis of the reform, the lack of teacher training for its effective implementation, school facilities with inadequate technology, and the lack of basic equipment for scientific activities continued to render education quality low.<sup>60</sup> Specialists like Pablo Latapí, the founder and head of Mexico’s Center for Education Studies and a lifelong researcher of pedagogy and education policy, critiqued the 1969 reform as a disjointed plan that lacked any scientific basis and was inoperable in practice.<sup>61</sup> In private, Latapí was more frank. A U.S. embassy representative related that Latapí did not believe people in the SEP were willing or able to implement real reform. According to the American official, Latapí believed that “‘learning while doing’ and ‘teaching while producing’ are empty slogans that are not new and signify no substantial reform of the education system.”<sup>62</sup>

Among the measures Latapí critiqued publicly was the assumption that technical agricultural schools—such as those created from previous rural normales—would have any discernible effect on diminishing migration to cities or mitigating unemployment problems in the countryside. For those schools and other rural education measures to be successful, he wrote, resources would need to be channeled to peripheral areas; training would have to target not only youth but adult campesinos; and the rural population would need to be conscious of their rights in order to participate in the political and economic choices that affected them.<sup>63</sup> Other critics pointed out that to truly improve education quality, the state needed more revenue, which could be attained by taxing the rich or implementing fiscal reforms, neither of which would happen under the Díaz Ordaz administration, whose rate of spending on education diminished significantly.<sup>64</sup> Just two years later, in 1971, the new president, Luis Echeverría, would convene a different commission to again overhaul the education system. Many of the 1969 changes



would thus go unimplemented and also unstudied. Their main merit, to again quote Latapí, was that “for the first time, there was open critique of the state of national education in which even some public officials recognized its deficiencies.”<sup>65</sup>

#### “THE REACTIONARY FORCES’ GRAVEST, MOST CRIMINAL AND ANTIPOPULAR DREAM”

A permanent measure of the 1969 reform, and the one rural normalistas most resented, was the conversion of half of their institutions into technical agricultural schools and the elimination of the *secundaria* years at the remaining fifteen. This was the biggest transformation the system had seen since the early 1940s, when coeducation and socialist pedagogy were eliminated. Institutions that had previously encompassed up to eight different school grades (three of junior high school, three of normal, and one or two complementary years for those who had not completed elementary school) were now reduced to four. The FECSM saw no merits in the SEP’s arguments and interpreted the restructuring as a retaliation for the 1968 student mobilizations in general and a strategy to undermine the federation specifically. Denouncing the restructuring as a move “against all the forces participating in the popular-student movement that began on July 26th,” the FECSM claimed that the government harbored special fury toward rural normalistas because of their combative nature. The FECSM did not oppose the creation of technical agricultural schools, but why, leaders protested, did these have to come at the expense of rural normales? With such measures the government had carried out the “reactionary forces’ gravest, most criminal and antipopular dream: the elimination of our boarding-school system.”<sup>66</sup> If the SEP sought to improve the quality of teacher graduates, why not expand the resources for the three-year professional cycle rather than add an additional year of study? This measure placed undue hardship on poor students, according to the FECSM, since it delayed their salary and thus their ability to support their parents and siblings, who still languished in poverty.<sup>67</sup>

In response to the SEP’s argument that the current structure yielded educators who were not motivated by a teaching vocation, the FECSM cited the example of Cuba. The island’s government, stated the federation, sought committed teachers not by searching out those with an innate predisposition—the calling that education officials constantly bemoaned that Mexican teachers lacked—but by cultivating it in a “revolutionary environment that is constructing a new society.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, one might see the environment in

Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s—the period the authorities themselves constantly invoked—as heroic, but its structural reforms, such as land redistribution and industry nationalization, had been not only abandoned but actively reversed by the state.

It is difficult to establish the 1968 student movement as the rationale for separating the *secundaria* from professional training at rural normales. Certainly, the timing does not seem coincidental. But such proposals had been discussed since 1954, and calls for the *bachillerato* (high school) requirement dated even further back.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, as was evident in the 1967 Mexico City conference on rural normales, education authorities saw students' persistent mobilization as a problem before the dramatic events at Tlatelolco. The SEP would likely have separated the professional cycle from the *secundaria* and increased it by a year regardless of 1968's events. However, the specific act of transforming half of the rural normales is drastic enough to suggest a strategy of containment, if not directly linked to the student movement in the capital, then at least in response to a decade of youthful unrest. That rural normales existed throughout the country, were interconnected through the FECSM, had recently developed ties to urban students through the CNED, and had a tradition of participating in *campesino* struggles made them significant organizing nodes, ones Díaz Ordaz's administration was loath to tolerate.

A clear sign that a plan was in the works before the events at Tlatelolco is a February 1968 report commissioned by the Federal Security Directorate. That an intelligence agency rather than an educational one conducted the study bespeaks its political nature. This geostrategic study described the size, cultivation, and political affiliation of the *ejidos* surrounding each of country's rural normales.<sup>70</sup> Significantly, once the SEP issued the order to transform fourteen of the rural normales into *secundarias*, it relied heavily on official *campesino* organizations to counter protest. During the summer months of 1969, in addition to the police, military, and other security forces, *campesino* members of the PRI-allied League of Agrarian Communities guarded the schools, having been promised that their children would receive spots there.<sup>71</sup> The latter strategy effectively pitted the poor against each other and was a manifestation of earlier declarations that if the *normalistas* did not appreciate the opportunities they were given, these would be directed to *campesinos* who did, ones, moreover, who were loyal to the regime. The level of state and federal coordination as well as the number of organizations involved in carrying out the change is striking. In addition to the League of Agrarian Communities, the state relied on other official organizations such as the National *Campesino* Confederation and the National School Repairs Commission as well

as various security forces, including the federal and state police, undercover agents, the military, and the transit police—the latter installed roadblocks to prevent support contingents from reaching individual schools.<sup>72</sup>

In the months leading up to the change, normalistas met to determine how best to resist the restructuring. Aristarco Aquino from Reyes Mantecón, one of the rural normales in Oaxaca that would be transformed into a technical agricultural school, remembered, “We formed brigades; those from the sierra were to make their way to the communities to inform, to explain the blow it represented to communities, and to seek support for the normal’s continued existence. We covered the entire state . . . and since there were a lot of teachers [in the communities] who had studied at Reyes Mantecón or Tamazulapan [another rural normal in Oaxaca], they took us in and supported us.”<sup>73</sup> Student organizing yielded protest letters from communities throughout the country who argued for the preservation of the twenty-nine rural normales as a matter of revolutionary justice, because they served the “humble classes” and because they are “all that is left of the Mexican Revolution for which Villa and Zapata fought.”<sup>74</sup> Letters pointed to the restructuring as hypocritical, noting that what education really needed was more resources and that it made little sense for a government purportedly committed to eliminating ignorance and promoting progress to close teacher-training schools. “Don’t make us think we continue to live in the era of Porfirismo,” stated a letter signed by twenty-eight campesinos from San Luis Potosí, “a time when only the children of the bourgeoisie received an education.”<sup>75</sup> Pointedly, others declared, “Why do we want agricultural technicians? What we need is land.”<sup>76</sup>

“Of course they ignored us,” stated Aquino. “The decision had already been made.”<sup>77</sup> While ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the measure, normalista efforts mobilized significant resistance in several locales. In Palmira, Morelos, students had done such extensive canvassing, noted intelligence agents, that school officials managed to enroll only three pupils for what was now a technical agricultural school, and teachers thus had to cancel classes. In Tiripetío, Michoacán, students opposing the change soon took over the school, preventing all but eleven students from enrolling. In many normales, students occupied the campuses during the summer, a process the SEP fought by ending food services and cutting off the water and electricity.<sup>78</sup> In many schools the parents association protested in support of the students.<sup>79</sup> In some cases, they did so because their kids would be sent to schools farther away, making it harder for parents to visit them. This situation was aggravated for female students, whose families were already reluctant to have them live away from home. In many cases, teachers and staff also opposed the

change and supported students by speaking at their demonstrations, finding them lodging, or holding meetings at their homes.<sup>80</sup> Students also found backing among surrounding communities. For example, in Perote, Veracruz, local businesses gave normalistas food and monetary donations; in Tamatán, Tamaulipas, school staff found places for students to stay when the authorities dislodged their school occupations.<sup>81</sup> “We tried so many things,” recalled a normalista from Tiripetío, Michoacán. “We’d canvass, we’d denounce, we’d invite communities, knowing [there was little hope]. But we’d do it, not everyone of course, but some. Still, the official propaganda was too strong.”<sup>82</sup>

So were the threats. The authorities notified the students that if they did not present themselves at their newly assigned schools by September 6, they would lose their scholarships. Where students occupied normales, police forcibly removed them and threatened the complete closure of their schools.<sup>83</sup> At some institutions the authorities displayed a massive show of force, as one student due to return to Salaces, now transformed into a technical agricultural school, recalled: “What we saw was astonishing. The road to the normal looked like an anthill—it was soldiers who did not allow us to come into the school. They told us our place was now in Aguilera, Durango.”<sup>84</sup> Numerous students were detained at military checkpoints or plucked off passenger buses, and the soldiers tormented and harassed them.<sup>85</sup>

The restructuring caused division within many rural normales themselves. While the government’s show of force bespeaks the measure’s general lack of popularity, not all students opposed the change.<sup>86</sup> As long as their scholarships remained intact, many normalistas were content to change schools. While some administrative and teaching personnel opposed their reassignment, their response was decidedly more mixed than that of the students. In Reyes Mantecón, for example, the staff predominantly originated from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region, and their transfer to Chiapas actually put them closer to home.<sup>87</sup> In some communities surrounding rural normales, the government’s campaign—waged through organizations like the League of Agrarian Communities and the National Campesino Confederation—effectively halted or overturned support for student protests.<sup>88</sup> The hardships entailed in occupying a school with no water, electricity, or food further dissuaded others.

Still, the FECSM continued its resistance and on September 3, 1969, called for a system-wide strike.<sup>89</sup> The minister of normal education, Ramón Bonfil, took it upon himself to visit individual schools to address this resistance. In Ayotzinapa, accompanied by representatives of the SNTE, the state-allied teachers’ union, local education officials, public-security members, and the

head of the state's judicial police, Bonfil issued students a forceful warning: if they were found agitating, their food would be suspended, and their teachers removed, and their water and electricity would be cut off; those who did not like the reform were invited to leave. If they organized, they would be expelled and blacklisted, preventing them from enrolling in other normales. Before leaving, the minister singled out ten student leaders, pulled them aside, and energetically reiterated the threats to them. He ended with a blanket warning against any type of mobilization, including complaints about food. When Bonfil departed, the uniformed police then guarding the school were removed, leaving in their place three undercover agents disguised as workers.<sup>90</sup>

But even such warnings failed to completely quell protest. After the minister visited Mactumactzá in Chiapas, the students changed their strike to rolling absences with thirty different students abstaining from class every day.<sup>91</sup> Teachers who supported student protests also received threats. In Atequiza, Jalisco, the education authorities reminded instructors that their salaries came from the government and, above all else, their loyalty should lie there. They were to report any student organizing and were warned that the SEP had a list of teachers and staff who had “fomented or encouraged the subversive activity of students.”<sup>92</sup> The education minister soon dangled a carrot alongside this stick, promising teachers better benefits if they opposed student organizing.<sup>93</sup>

The FECSM put on a brave fight, but by the end of September, it was clear that they could not stop the restructuring. Its leadership reaffirmed its commitment to the rural normal system, declaring it would remain firm in its fight for educational access, and demanded that the government continue to recognize the federation as an autonomous organization representing rural normal students.<sup>94</sup> But their struggle became a defensive one, reduced now to securing enrollment for those expelled for protesting the reform. Distress—the sense that a major battle, and perhaps the war, had been lost—pervaded the FECSM leadership. To the extent that the 1960s marked the explosion of youth mobilization, this blow to rural normales was even more crushing. Saúl López de la Torre, from the rural normal of Mactumactzá in Chiapas, vividly evoked the leadership's sentiment in the wake of the restructuring: “During the first week of November, I attended what would be the last FECSM convention of that period. The meeting—more like a funeral than a national political assembly—took place in a small establishment in the historic center of Mexico City. No more than twenty of us from different parts of the country came to discuss the path we'd take in light of the new power relations.”<sup>95</sup>

What the FECSM lost with the system's restructuring was not teacher training spots. Those numbers would ostensibly remain the same, albeit confined to half as many schools. The true loss, as a FECSM leader explained, was the means to politicize and organize students starting at the junior high school age. "As of 1970, when the reform went into effect, the FECSM had six thousand fewer members and a reserve of only two school years in which to politically prepare students to sustain the national organization. This was without a doubt one of the most intelligent acts that the education authorities could have undertaken. In one fell swoop, they decimated the best-organized forces that the independent and democratic student movement preserved after 1968."<sup>96</sup>

THE 1969 RESTRUCTURING of rural normales stands as a watershed moment in normalista narratives, even for those who did not experience it directly. Time and again, students cited the elimination of fourteen rural normales as official retaliation against a network of schools that produced unruly subjects. Given the 1968 student protest in the capital, their logic goes, President Díaz Ordaz was proactive in stifling those poised to take up its mantle. In their accounts, normalistas rarely, if ever, mention the accompanying academic measures. Even the additional year of study that postponed their receipt of a salary—in the moment a significant grievance—merits scant attention decades later. Such an interpretation, and the outsized role that political action plays in normalista memories in general, reveals both objective and subjective realities. In the case of the former, it shows the extent to which leftist ideological formation constituted a part of school life—a parallel curriculum, as one study termed it.<sup>97</sup> The elimination of half of the country's normales also served to confirm the oft-repeated message of student leaders: post-Cardenista administrations had no interest in preserving these institutions; on the contrary, given the opportunity, they would be eliminated. More broadly, this understanding speaks to the 1960s as a decade of youthful mobilization, which, despite scholars' focus on Mexico City, encompassed the entire country, including rural areas.

With regard to subjective realities, emphasizing Díaz Ordaz's political motivation allows for the possibility that the normalistas, too, were historical protagonists—even if defeated ones. Given the prominence that Tlatelolco has come to occupy in Mexico's recent political narrative, it is not surprising that rural normalistas tie their own mobilizations and the state's response to this event, especially since, until the 2014 attack on Ayotzinapa, rural normalistas remained largely invisible in national histories of student

protest. At a personal level, moreover, highlighting their intrepid spirit of resistance helps reconcile a basic contradiction between the ideal and the reality of their education and professional trajectory. While rural normales were to graduate committed teachers whose missionary duty would have them return to the countryside, where they would teach and live among the most vulnerable population, graduates instead gravitated to urban areas where they had greater professional opportunities and a chance at a more comfortable life. Whether or not they continued their political activism, and whether or not they upheld leftist ideological principles, normalistas overwhelmingly emphasize the noble ideal of the rural normal project. No wonder they condemn a measure that curtailed it.

Less evident in their oral histories but pervasive in the documents produced at the time are the fundamentally different assumptions under which the FECSM and the education authorities operated. Both recognized deficiencies in rural normales and the extent to which limited resources aggravated the problem. For students, this financial neglect was representative of the state's larger disregard for campesinos. The problems were structural and demanded radical action, measures that seemed possible based on the Cardenista past and the revolutionary present. In a decade marked by global student movements and anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, in which the Cuban Revolution figured prominently as a socialist example, this is hardly surprising. In both universities and normal schools, Marxism, relayed an alarmist U.S. embassy report, was the dominant framework by which students understood their reality.<sup>98</sup>

For the SEP, the shortcomings at rural normales were symptomatic of larger problems within the teacher-training system, to be resolved through updated pedagogical methods, professional efficiency, appeals to self-sacrifice, and better instilling of moral and civic values. While SEP authorities dismissed student calls for structural transformation as based on youthful idealism, their own emphasis that normalistas ought to demonstrate a selfless spirit of service was itself an idealistic appeal, compelling teachers to renounce basic material comforts in the name of patriotic duty. Accepting this condition was the best way to serve a poor nation like Mexico. From this perspective it is easy to see why normalistas' political involvement constituted such an obstacle to professional efficiency. Not only did it give students the ideological tools with which the challenge the state, but it took them away from classes, disrupted the smooth running of institutions, and produced constant obstacles to state dictums. Whether politically motivated or not, halving the rural normal system constituted a means to curtail this challenge.