

“That’s How We’d Meet . . . Clandestinely with the Lights Off”

“WHEN WE ARRIVED at the normal of Tamazulapan, the environment was very hostile,” recalled Elsa Guzmán, who began her studies there in 1970. “I think [school] authorities took their task very seriously, and some of the staff thought they had all the power over us.” Guzmán spoke of verbal abuse, insults, and general mistreatment—a painful environment that hurt students’ self-esteem. “We endured it for two years, until it became intolerable. When I was in my third year, we started meeting in the bathrooms. At first it was just two of us, then three, four. That’s how we’d meet . . . clandestinely, with the lights off.” When their secret meetings reached twenty people, they decided it was time to call a strike, to lead the rest of the student body in a walkout. “If people joined us, then we’d made it; otherwise, we knew we’d be expelled.”¹ Much to their surprise, their peers followed. So began the process of reconstituting the Mexican Federation of Socialist Campesino Students (FECSM).

The 1969 reform that converted fourteen of the twenty-nine rural normales into technical agricultural schools and separated the secundaria from the professional training stands as a traumatic moment in normalista memories. The reform decimated the rural normal system by reducing the number of schools, constraining their geographic reach, and curtailing the years

students spent at the institutions (map 8.1). That the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) implemented this transformation in the wake of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre rendered political a purportedly educational reform. The changes came with a tightened control over the student body—an iron fist, as one intelligence officer characterized it. School administrators prohibited student associations, and officials refused to recognize the FECSM as a mediating body.²

This chapter examines the rural normales in the aftermath of the 1969 reform amid the political fallout generated by the Tlatelolco massacre. It traces the process by which the FECSM reconstituted itself and the nature of rural normalistas' political involvement in the 1970s. This decade saw important transformations for the student body. Most significantly, the federation that reemerged was more militant but also more fractured. This quality was itself a product of the contradictory political environment in which it regrouped. President Luis Echeverría (1970–76), eager to repair the beleaguered image of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), embarked on a series of reforms. Seeking to portray himself as an heir to Lázaro Cárdenas's legacy, Echeverría declared education expansion and land redistribution two cornerstones of his administration. He also touted a democratic opening, lowered the voting age, and freed political prisoners—many of whom had languished in jail since the labor struggles of the 1950s. Echeverría also sought to revive Mexico's revolutionary credentials by providing asylum to those fleeing Augusto Pinochet's Chile and taking a leadership role in Third World politics. This context provided some breathing room for the FECSM and contributed to its ability to regroup and, eventually, regain SEP recognition. Most remarkably, it enabled the construction of a new rural normal in Amilcingo, Morelos.

But the PRI's new face had its limits. Echeverría maintained the state's repressive apparatus—and not only against radicals, a fact vividly demonstrated with the 1971 police and paramilitary attack on student demonstrators in Mexico City. The operation left two dozen dead and more than a hundred injured.³ In the sierra of Guerrero, the regime that sought to revive Cárdenas's legacy encountered guerrillas led by rural teachers, the very figureheads of 1930s Cardenista policy. Lucio Cabañas, a 1963 Ayotzinapa graduate and former FECSM general secretary, took up arms after a series of government massacres blocked his effort at peaceful protest. In response, the state unleashed its full might, a dirty war that forcibly displaced, killed, tortured, or disappeared hundreds of campesinos.⁴



MAP 8.1 Rural Normales, 1969–1970

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------|----|-----------------------|
| 1 | Aguilera, Durango | 9 | El Quinto, Sonora |
| 2 | Atequiza, Jalisco | 10 | San Marcos, Zacatecas |
| 3 | Ayotzinapa, Guerrero | 11 | Saucillo, Chihuahua |
| 4 | Cañada Honda, Aguascalientes | 12 | Tamazulapan, Oaxaca |
| 5 | Hecelchakán, Campeche | 13 | Tenería, Mexico State |
| 6 | Mactumactzá, Chiapas | 14 | Teteles, Puebla |
| 7 | El Mexe, Hidalgo | 15 | Tiripetío, Michoacán |
| 8 | Panotla, Tlaxcala | | |

Source: “Escuelas Normales Rurales,” August 18, 1969, Archivo General de la Nación, Dirección Federal de Seguridad 63-19, Leg.9, H189–91.

Note: This map should be taken with a degree of caution since most documentation contains errors or inconsistencies.

It is not surprising that Echeverría resorted to such brutal force. He had been, after all, part of the inner circle that presided over the Tlatelolco massacre. Nor is it surprising that his populist attempts to reform the economy failed. In this latter effort, he was hampered not only by three decades of economic policy that favored industry, agribusiness, and the urban sector but by elites intent on preventing changes to a system from which they had benefited so handily. As Echeverría came to be besieged by northern industrialists and right-wing elements of the middle class, his administration increasingly tried to characterize normalistas' protest as antirevolutionary.⁵ Under the logic that any protest against the president ultimately fortified reactionaries, the SEP painted leftist normalistas as "instruments of a fascist process."⁶ These allegations had little staying power. But the official demonization of their schools persisted and, in fact, was cemented during the 1970s. Normalistas' new tactics—which included commandeering buses and setting up roadblocks—made them increasingly visible to an urban public and fed the view of them as disruptive troublemakers whose last priority was to study. That their schools became recruiting grounds for clandestine groups branded rural normales as guerrilla seedbeds, a label that persists to the present. As the 1970s wore on and new educational reforms created a byzantine teacher-training system in which private and state (as opposed to federal) normales increasingly crowded the institutional landscape, rural normales distinguished themselves ever more by the militancy of their students.

"THE REACTION OF THE COMPAÑERAS WAS FIERCE"

The 1969/70 academic year was turbulent at rural normales. Unable to halt their schools' restructuring, normalistas disrupted its implementation. It took some time for the education authorities to gain control of the situation; when they did, it was through draconian disciplinary measures, including the prohibition of student associations. "The crisis was terrible," remembered Marcos José García, who in the fall of 1969 began his studies in Reyes Mantecón, a rural normal in Oaxaca, now turned into a technical agricultural school. The environment left him unsettled. "I got very scared and went home. . . . When I came back a month later, the situation was calmer."⁷ Or so it seemed. Tensions bubbled up as collective rage. "When [SEP] officials arrived, there would be war in the cafeteria," recalled Aristarco Aquino Solís, a student from Mactumactzá. "It started slowly, with pieces of bread. One visiting official ended up doused in coffee."⁸ Elsa Guzmán spoke of

similar moments in Champusco, Puebla, where she was first transferred in the wake of the restructuring. When the general secretary of normal education, Ramón Bonfil, visited the school, “the reaction of the compañeras was fierce. Plates started flying. The man left covered in food. . . . The aggression was strong; they even threatened to close the school because of that action.”⁹ At San Marcos, Zacatecas, the outbursts at cafeterias went further, with students hurling dishes, overturning tables, and slamming furniture, a mess they were all made to clean up.¹⁰

The sources of this pent-up resentment were many. Not only did the tightened control elicit authoritarian practice, but it increased graft. With no student associations to oversee them, teachers, administrators, and staff could more easily extract food funds, resources, and boarding-school supplies. Reconstituting the FECSM in this environment was no easy task. The intensity of the 1969 resistance and the normalistas’ inability to prevent the system’s restructuring exhausted their energies and dampened morale.¹¹ Some of the most active student leaders had been expelled or had joined guerrilla struggles. Those completing their last year of study were especially hesitant to participate in strikes or to engage in other acts of resistance since doing so jeopardized the timely receipt of their diplomas.¹²

But an undercurrent of discontent persisted. Organizing efforts at individual schools soon overlapped with those of delegates who sought to reconstitute the FECSM nationally. The processes fed off one another. Only if students gathered sufficient organizing capacity at individual schools could federation delegates force the SEP to the negotiating table. In Mexico City, students from various rural normales had been meeting since the summer of 1970. Little came of it until 1972, when they united rural normales behind a set of demands consisting of freedom of association (including facilitating the conditions under which FECSM delegates could travel to national meetings); increased food rations, stipends, scholarships, and teachers; and the resignation of rural education director Lucio López Iriarte for his “despotic, arbitrary, and inept” policies.¹³

Normalista delegates presented this list of demands to the SEP in July 1972, but not until November, when all rural normales went on strike, did the authorities respond, agreeing to raise food amounts and stipends but deferring the other matters to a later date.¹⁴ Still, these two concessions stood as a victory. Rural normales had presented a united front and brought the SEP to the bargaining table. By meeting with FECSM delegates, the SEP had again recognized it as a legitimate representative body. The student group moved quickly to organize a reconstituting congress in December. Seventy-five representatives

from the fifteen rural normales attended this meeting at Tenería in Mexico State.¹⁵ The FECSM soon achieved another victory, the removal of López Iriarte, whom they accused of systematically rejecting any petition brought before him.¹⁶

These nationally coordinated efforts overlapped with a series of mobilizations at individual normales. In Saucillo the normalistas pressured for the readmittance of two students expelled for protesting the 1969 reform; in San Marcos students ousted the director, whose authoritarianism had crossed a line when he struck a student; Mactumactzá and Tiripetío followed, the former running off their director for fund mismanagement and the latter for negligence.¹⁷ Telling with regard to how students experienced the reassertion of their power are the words of Elsa Guzmán, whose story opened this chapter: “We came together to fight for our freedom, our autonomy to again organize ourselves and the normal. . . . It then fell to me to tell the assistant principal who mistreated us and the teacher who groped students that they had twenty-four hours to abandon the school.”¹⁸

The FECSM made headway on both material and political demands. The latter involved a lenient absence policy for delegates, whose duties meant frequent travel and who would otherwise lose their right to take final exams.¹⁹ Normalistas also achieved important concessions in agrarian disputes involving their schools. Significantly, such victories benefited neighboring campesino communities as much as the normales themselves. In 1974, for example, students from Tenería secured the restitution of sixty-three hectares of land that they proposed be cultivated by landless campesinos, alongside whom the students would work to fulfill their agricultural training requirement. The campesinos, in turn, would keep the harvested crops.²⁰ Likewise, in 1975, in the rural normal of El Mexe, where teachers had appropriated land meant for agricultural training, students mobilized to turn it over to the neighboring campesinos.²¹ In other instances, normalistas secured support from rural dwellers to preserve or expand their schools. For example, in Sonora, when the SEP sought to transfer the rural normal of El Quinto to Guesave, Sinaloa, because it did not have enough land, students opposed to the move convinced campesinos in the surrounding area to donate the required acreage in return for compensation by agrarian authorities.²²

More broadly, the FECSM assessed the national context to formulate a path of struggle beyond school walls. In their 1974 conference in Mactumactzá, 250 normalistas debated strategies for broader popular engagement and named commissions charged with approaching workers, campesinos, and the poor in order to better understand their problems and support their

struggles.²³ At individual schools students had already made concerted efforts to participate in popular mobilizations. The list was long. In January 1973 the federation convened a meeting in Tiripetío to determine how best to aid striking sugarcane laborers in Veracruz; the following year, students from El Mexe sent sugar, beans, and coffee to striking cement workers in Tula, Hidalgo, and later joined the workers as they attempted a factory takeover; in northern Mexico, students from Aguilera and Saucillo supported and participated in campesino land takeovers.²⁴ Mactumactzá students aided mill workers at Maderas de Comitán as they formed an independent union, and those from Tenería supported the workers at the Radio Majestic factory in the nearby state of Tlaxcala when they sought higher wages; in Hecelchakán, Campeche, normalistas mobilized against the hike in bus fares.²⁵ Telling of such support for workers, one intelligence report—after listing the various agrarian, worker, and civil servants (*burócratas*) struggles in Chiapas—commented, “Of course, all of these movements are spearheaded by students of the state’s rural normal.”²⁶ These actions represented a continuation of rural normalistas’ engagement with popular struggles and, while sporadic, added elements of praxis to the revolutionary theory they read and discussed in their political study groups.

Internally, the FECSM attempted to make some changes in its organizational structure, though the degree to which it underwent substantive change is unclear. At their 1974 conference in Mactumactzá, Chiapas, delegates discussed proposals for a less hierarchical organization, one in which the national council became a coordinating body and the secretary general a mediator rather than a figurehead charged with decision-making. The position, moreover, would be subject to more frequent rotation. Conference proceedings also indicated the need for more deliberate and systematic study of Marxism-Leninism to best “direct the struggle of the working and lower classes” when conditions were ripe. Finally, during this conference the delegates voted to assume the representation of the technical agricultural schools, the rural normales that had become junior high schools with the 1969 reform.²⁷ The arrangement was short-lived, partly because of the strong retaliation of the education authorities, who tracked normalista organizers and, after their first joint national strike, expelled close to nine hundred secundaria students.²⁸ In a volatile environment also characterized by fissures within the FECSM itself, representation of the secundarias proved untenable.

By some measures the FECSM that came together in the early 1970s was more militant but its divisions more salient. Still, if 1969 stands as a moment of defeat, the protest actions of the early 1970s evoke a sense of renewed student

power, whose manifestations went from outbursts of rage, to strikes, to solidarity campaigns with workers and campesinos, to direct action in which students commandeered buses or mounted roadblocks. The most radical joined armed movements. In this context, divisions over strategy, ideological debates, and organizational allegiances became more accentuated and drove wedges between militant groups and the general student body. Four factors contributed to this tendency. First, the restructuring of rural normales from six-year institutions that included both *secundaria* and professional training to four-year teacher-training schools reduced the age span of the student body and shortened the amount of time students spent there. This effectively diminished the FECSM's time frame for recruitment, ideological continuity, and organizational training. Second, for individuals anxious for change, actions such as commandeering buses or collaborating with guerrillas provided an outlet that came at the cost of the slower, piecemeal work involved in consciousness raising and collective organizing. Such activity, in turn, gave the government and media outlets more ammunition with which to demonize the rural normalistas, who were often presented as marauding youth gangs. During the FECSM's 1974 conference in Chiapas, for example, a San Cristóbal de las Casas radio announcer took to the airwaves to warn parents that students from rural normales and a group of indigenous people—whose mobilization in the neighboring town normalistas had supported—planned to attack kindergartens and elementary schools with stones and Molotov cocktails. In response, principals closed the schools as anxious parents picked up their kids. "The report was false," wrote an intelligence officer later. "No students from the rural normales were in the vicinity of the elementary schools, nor were there any incidents there."²⁹

Third, the government stepped up its efforts to co-opt students. The Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores, PST), which one 1970s normalista characterized as "neither a party, nor socialist, nor of workers," was one vehicle for recruitment into state circles. "They were of a filiation very close to the PRI," explained Marcos José García from Tiripetío, where the PST's efforts were especially strong. "They were practically the left wing of the PRI. They would go to normales to co-opt . . . [and] conjure up conflicts, divisions."³⁰ In 1975 the FECSM itself denounced government and education authorities for using the party to undermine the federation's long history of struggle.³¹ The PST began recruiting members at rural normales and gained strength through its ability to curry favor with high-level SEP officials.³² In schools like Tiripetío, El Mexe, Hecelchakán, and Mactumac-tzá, its affiliates soon claimed to have ousted the FECSM as a representative

body.³³ In 1976 the PST planned a national constituting conference in El Mexe to wrest control away from the FECSM.³⁴ While ultimately unsuccessful in supplanting the FECSM at the national level, the PST's actions led to considerable division among the student body.

Finally, despite initial SEP concessions that allowed the FECSM to regroup, the education authorities soon moved forward with stricter regulations on collective action. Any strikes of five continuous days or ten aggregated ones would result in the suspension of classes, declared a 1976 SEP regulation. Students would thus lose credit for the entire semester. Modifications to the school calendar made in previous decades to account for days lost to strikes would now be disallowed, preventing students from making up the time.³⁵ The only option would be to repeat the year. "Young students, you should stop and think!" declared the head of teacher-training education, "*the schools and universities that the sons and daughters of the rich attend do not miss any days. It is noteworthy that the more the academic indicators in our own schools descend, the better they remain in universities and institutions of higher culture.*" Tinged with class contempt, the statement further asserted that student mobilizations elicited hostility among surrounding populations, undermined institutions emanating from the revolution, and led earnest students to drop out and militant ones to be expelled, thus undermining the teaching profession more generally.³⁶

In this way, while the FECSM was able to regroup, SEP authorities also stepped up their efforts to foment a black legend about rural normales. The proliferation of guerrilla groups throughout the country and their connection to rural normales (discussed later in this chapter) further facilitated the criminalization of these students and their schools. That Echeverría provided visible concessions to campesinos and students—such as the recognition of the new rural normal in Amilcingo—reinforced the impression that militant normalistas were being unreasonable.

"AN ACT OF JUSTICE TO MEXICO'S AGRARIAN MOVEMENT"

Remarkably, given the 1969 closing of half of the rural normales, the community of Amilcingo, Morelos, pushed through the creation of a new one in 1974.³⁷ The population of Amilcingo, located on the state's eastern border with Puebla, consisted mainly of subsistence farmers and seasonal agricultural workers. Spearheaded by Eva Rivera, a local elementary schoolteacher and a 1957 graduate of the rural normal of Palmira, and Vinh Flores, a member of the Youth Communist Party, the initiative brought together actors of

various political stripes. Rivera belonged to the local evangelical church and recruited support among its members, including Benedicto Rosales Olivar, the president of the ejido association, and Justo Rivera, a local town council assistant. Other municipal authorities associated with the PRI, like Nabor Barrera, also joined the effort.³⁸ This small, unlikely group of evangelicals, communists, and priístas (official party members) put together a makeshift teacher-training school whose classes began in Amilcingo's municipal building, where teachers from Rivera's school volunteered their time imparting evening classes. Flores recruited students from nearby communities, many of whom were initially housed by campesinos and, in exchange, helped with farming tasks. Twenty-six students passed through Rivera's home alone. As enrollment increased, the school moved to the town's evangelical temple. Soon the initiative came to the attention of students at other rural normales. Pedagogical material arrived from Tamazulapan, Oaxaca; mattresses from Tenería, Mexico State; and FECSM delegates from El Quinto, Sonora. Calling itself a *normal rural popular*, in its first few months, the school had a constant, if unstable, flow of students.³⁹

In the first few months of operation, the school's main challenges were logistical: providing room and board for students, finding adequate classrooms, managing the informal personnel, and retaining a stable student body. Only official SEP recognition would bring the necessary resources to address these matters, not to mention legitimize the graduates' diplomas. The school's federalization thus became the next goal, a battle that the FECSM joined. The federation's involvement strengthened the movement as rural normalistas from across the country traveled to Amilcingo, organized community brigades, and incorporated the school's recognition into the demand list they issued to the SEP.⁴⁰ As the mobilizations in favor of the school picked up pace, so did official opposition. On March 21, 1974, for example, normalistas and community members held a joint demonstration in Cuautla, where Eva Rivera figured visibly as a speaker and organizer. In the following days, the local school inspector ordered her transfer from Amilcingo to a remote community in the southern part of the state.⁴¹

Rivera's removal triggered the first of several fissures in the movement. Some ejidatarios blamed the normalistas for the government's retaliation. Since the students' arrival, the town had begun to see graffiti reading "Long live Lucio Cabañas" and "The guerrillas are the people." Indeed, at a Cuautla demonstration, the normalistas had shouted antigovernment proclamations and handed out leaflets in support of Lucio Cabañas's guerrilla group.⁴² Such proclamations made many locals nervous. Undeterred, the FECSM pressed

forward, calling a strike of rural normalistas in support of the normal's recognition and the restitution of Flores to her original post.⁴³ Despite tensions, they planned a joint community-student march from Amilcingo to the SEP's offices in Mexico City on May 5, 1974. Their cause drew support from students at the Autonomous Universities of Guerrero, Zacatecas, Yucatán, and Puebla, as well as the agricultural schools of Chapingo, Delicias, Iguala, and Venecia.⁴⁴ Independent campesino organizations also responded to the call for support. When the marchers reached the city of Cuautla, they encountered a commission that included Morelos governor Felipe Rivera Crespo and normal education secretary Víctor Hugo Bolaños. Backed by an army dispatch, the state officials convinced the participants to call off the march and enter into negotiations.⁴⁵ By the end of May, the authorities agreed to support the construction of a women's normal—to be named Emiliano Zapata—"an act of justice to Mexico's agrarian movement and its principal proponent."⁴⁶ A committee made up of SEP members, students, and campesinos was tasked with obtaining the required fifty hectares on which to build the school. Within less than a month, the ejidatarios had agreed to provide just shy of that amount (49.83 hectares).⁴⁷ Campesinos and rural normalistas from various schools cleared and prepared the land for construction, with students forming brigades to procure food donations to sustain the volunteers.⁴⁸

The process was anything but smooth. Not all members of the ejido association had supported their land's expropriation. While the initial disagreements were resolved within the ejidatario council, conflict bubbled up again during the compensation process.⁴⁹ Objections were practical as well as political. The land that the agrarian authorities offered in exchange was farther away, and the distance represented a hardship for farmers. Politically, opposition came from those who sympathized with the Popular Socialist Party, opposed as it was to an initiative spearheaded by communists on the one hand (such as Vinh Flores) and *prístas* (municipal and ejido authorities) on the other. Such conflicts soon turned violent and before the decade's end left all but one of the leaders dead. Benedicto Rosales Olivar, the head of the ejido association and a strong proponent of the school, was the first victim, shot in the back just outside his home on November 12, 1975. A year later, Vinh Flores, the young communist and key protagonist of the initiative, was found dead, killed alongside his uncle in the neighboring region of Puebla.⁵⁰ Rumors placed the blame for these murders on local gunmen protected by state authorities.⁵¹ Given official disinterest in pursuing an investigation, three campesinos who had fought alongside Flores took justice into their own hands, killing his alleged murderers. This crime the authorities did pursue,

apprehending and torturing those responsible.⁵² Two years later, the murders continued with the killing of Nabor Barrera, the president of the newly created municipality of Temoac and an early supporter of the Amilcingo normal initiative.⁵³ The presumed intellectual and material authors responsible for slaying the school proponents were themselves killed in 1979.⁵⁴

There were other troubling dynamics. Conflicts within the student body developed during its first federally operated school year. Some of the students sought to maintain a close relationship with Amilcingo's community members, while a rival group wanted decisions made under the rubric of institutional autonomy. This conflict stifled future grassroots collaboration between the community and the school, the very solidarity that first gave the initiative strength. As it evolved, the school-community relationship became more functionalist. The normal provided educational opportunities for the daughters of the local population—70 percent of its student body came from Morelos, with the rest hailing from Guerrero, Puebla, and Oaxaca.⁵⁵ Moreover, the staffing and administrative positions went to the Amilcingo population, providing a much-needed source of employment. In addition, the normalistas undertook their student teaching in the local elementary schools and organized festivities surrounding civic holidays.⁵⁶

As with other rural normales, Amilcingo developed a strong activist tradition. National FECSM delegates immediately organized a student committee there. Ever determined to ensure a presence in all normales, the FECSM appealed to students by invoking education both as an opportunity for material security and as a popular vindication. Xóchitl García, who began her studies in Amilcingo a year after its founding and was active in the student association, remembered, "Our compañeros helped and at the same time pushed us to learn. They said that it wasn't just about arriving once the table was set, or about just becoming teachers. It was about participating [in the struggle] so that it could be stronger, so that more students could arrive and continue to have professional opportunities, to change the country, to feed their families, and to help the people."⁵⁷

In the Morelos countryside, such messages found fertile ground, and even if the Amilcingo community did not participate in the decision-making structure of the new school, the students who studied there engaged—indeed, often had ties to—local histories of struggle. Xóchitl García is a case in point. The daughter of a prominent Jaramillista—a campesino movement that in preceding decades had fought for agrarian rights through legal and armed struggle—García was no stranger to the state's repressive apparatus. Not only had Rubén Jaramillo, the movement's leader, been massacred by

the army alongside his wife and three sons a decade earlier, but García's own father had been the victim of a brutal attack by hired gunmen.⁵⁸ To García and the politicized student body of the normal, the fate of activists like Vinh Flores confirmed the repressive nature of the state, not to mention the precious quality of social gains, which more often than not came at the cost of human life. With no formal accountability for the murders of local activists, their fate came to be understood within the pattern of violence meted out to community leaders. As García stated about Flores, "He was a brave man of the countryside who did not get to see the culmination of the normal because he was assassinated. We found out later—because the truth was hidden for a long time—that it was the state government that had him killed. . . . They ambushed him alongside the person he was with. . . . They massacred them out in the fields and left them there like animals."⁵⁹ Amilcingo's student committee would take its name from the slain leader, and today a large mural in the school's cafeteria honors him along with Nabor Barrera and Benedicto Rosales Olivar, the two other local leaders who fought for the school's creation and were killed in the ensuing years.⁶⁰

In both its victory and the lives lost to secure it, the rural normal of Amilcingo presents a vivid example of the achievements and sacrifices of resistance movements. The timing of its creation symbolized Echeverría's proclaimed commitment to education and to the countryside. Seen in a long-term context, it displayed the PRI's tried-and-true carrot-and-stick strategy. But Echeverría's populist measures and political reforms could not erase his close association with the Tlatelolco massacre. And if to many 1968 symbolized the point of no return in the move from reformist to armed tactics, the 1969 decimation of the rural normales further reinforced the logic of guerrilla struggle since it signaled a large-scale strategy of containment against student movements. Faced with the opportunity to join or aid clandestine groups, many rural normalistas took it. Some viewed their choice as a moral imperative, others as a logical action since they had been expelled, and yet others as the most effective way to create change. Regardless of the motivation, the rural normales' history, militant tradition, and presence throughout the country would make them both recruiting grounds and hubs of guerrilla support.

"TO CHANGE THE WORLD"

If the 1965 guerrilla attack on the military barracks of Madera, Chihuahua, had already revealed the symbolic and material link between armed struggle and rural normales, the various guerrilla groups that emerged throughout

the country in the wake of 1968 solidified this connection. The Revolutionary Action Movement (Movimiento de Acción Revolucionaria, MAR), the 23rd of September Communist League (Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre), the National Revolutionary Civic Association, and the Party of the Poor— itself led by a graduate of the rural normal of Ayotzinapa—all included rural normalistas as either participants or support networks. The proliferation of guerrilla groups in Mexico was another symptom of the PRI's legitimacy crisis. Even before the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, state repression had led popular leaders to take up arms. Rubén Jaramillo in Morelos, Arturo Gámiz and Pablo Gómez in Chihuahua, and Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas in Guerrero had all resorted to armed struggle when the state's targeted persecution and campesino massacres closed other avenues of protest. October 2 uncovered this reality for the urban, middle-class public, leading many university students to pursue a similar route.

For many student insurgents, the international context was equally significant. Since 1959 the Cuban Revolution had inspired hope about the possibilities of socialist revolution. Anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa vividly showcased Third World actors as protagonists of liberation, while the war in Vietnam laid bare the brutal nature of U.S. imperialism. In Europe, Japan, and the United States, internal protest showed that the First World was hardly the model modernization theorists had long maintained. And in both life and death, Ernesto "Che" Guevara stubbornly stoked the youthful imagination.

During the 1970s there were twenty-nine guerrilla organizations in Mexico, together involving 1,860 participants.⁶¹ The MAR, the 23rd of September Communist League, and the groups led by Vázquez and Cabañas in Guerrero most intersected with the rural normales. Initiated by about a dozen students, most of whom belonged to the Communist Youth Cadre, the MAR dated back to the mid-1960s, spurred in no small measure by the repression at schools outside the capital. In Michoacán many had congregated in the Nicolaita Student House, living quarters for out-of-town university students and the place where rural normalistas from La Huerta and Tiripetío took refuge during their resistance to the 1969 normal restructuring.⁶² Some of the MAR's initial participants had studied in the Soviet Union's Patricio Lumumba University and would later receive training in North Korea, which during the 1960s and 1970s supported liberation struggles throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The MAR conceived of itself as the vanguard group that would eventually lead Mexico's socialist revolution.⁶³ It first sought training in Cuba, but the island's close diplomatic relationship with

Mexico kept it from lending support. North Korea, which then sought to foster a policy of guerrilla internationalism, eagerly took them in and from 1969 to 1970 lent military training to fifty-three MAR members.⁶⁴ Upon their return, in conjunction with other armed groups, the MAR saw its task as accelerating the conditions for a popular uprising. By the early 1970s, with almost a hundred members, it had a presence in at least ten states and the Federal District.⁶⁵

From Chihuahua, rural normalistas like Alma Gómez Caballero and Herminia Gómez Carrasco, students from Saucillo and daughters of the activist teachers Pablo Gómez and Raúl Gómez respectively, joined the MAR. Gómez Carrasco's involvement with the MAR began while she was studying at Saucillo. Long active in campesino mobilizations, whose land takeovers she participated in, she was expelled in October 1969 for taking part in a commemoration of the 1968 student massacre. "By then, a *compañero* from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, . . . had already recruited us to be part of the Revolutionary Action Movement," she recalled. "We were going to join once we finished at the normal; we weren't going to just grab a gun and leave. But since they expelled me . . . I went to Mexico City and from there to North Korea, where we received military training as part of the MAR. We were there a year and then returned as an armed group—to change the world!"⁶⁶

Individual normalistas' reasons for joining or supporting armed movements varied. Gómez Carrasco's last phrase, a reflection said half in jest, is a common frame. Ushering in a better world seemed within arm's reach, and the normalistas—involved in political action from a young age—wanted to be part of that effort. Such impulses reflect a commonsense devotion to political struggle amplified by radical strains in normalista culture and accentuated by the decade's *zeitgeist*.⁶⁷ Many specifically cite the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre as an event that signaled the close of legal channels. "You're expressing your right to free speech, you're fighting for your constitutional rights, and you're defending simple things like university autonomy, and the government responds with bullets! What message is it sending?!" reflected Alma Gómez Caballero, who joined the MAR.⁶⁸ For those moved but not convinced by 1968, the 1969 closure and clampdown at rural normales acted as the final push. Today some think of the decision as naive, while others marvel at the courage it took—a product of youthful temerity, a bravery possible since they were not weighed down by family responsibilities.

To the extent that there is a relationship between youth and audacious acts, it was the 23rd of September Communist League that most capitalized on this propensity. The league, an urban guerrilla group taking its name from

the date of the 1965 attack on Chihuahua's military barracks in Madera, also had significant reach in rural normales. Founded in 1973 in Guadalajara, the league was the most radical and largest of the guerrilla groups in Cold War Mexico, made up of a coalition of seven independent guerrilla groups together numbering about 450. Its membership was primarily student based.⁶⁹ Ideologically, the league saw universities as institutions integral to the process of capitalist accumulation. By extension, students were proletarians. The group relied on revolutionary expropriations (bank heists) and kidnapping of prominent figures—Eugenio Garza Sada, the powerful Monterrey industrialist; José Guadalupe Zuno, the president's father-in-law; and Terrence G. Leonhardt, the U.S. consul general, were three of their most high-profile abductions. Tactically, the league prioritized political violence over grassroots organizing, and members often found themselves in open confrontation with the police. Despite its urban focus, the group did recruit and gain adherents in rural normales.⁷⁰ Elsa Guzmán from Tamazulapan, Oaxaca, remembered her collaboration with this group. "As a security measure, we never asked their names. But there was this one woman whom we called *la maestra*, and she was pregnant. She seemed about to give birth, and she still trained us in how to use a gun." Guzmán characterized that training as a self-defense measure for when she took supplies to guerrillas. At other points, Guzmán remembered bringing league members to the normal to eat at the cafeteria. "They're my aunt and uncle," she would respond to anyone who asked.⁷¹

But it was Lucio Cabañas's Party of the Poor, a campesino guerrilla group based in Guerrero, that became most associated with the rural normales. Not only was Cabañas an Ayotzinapa graduate, but he had been the head of the FECSM in the early 1960s; his fame resounded throughout the rural normal system, and he himself relied on normalista networks while operating clandestinely.⁷² The character of Cabañas's guerrilla group, moreover, was in some ways closer to rural normalista culture than either the MAR or the 23rd of September Communist League. A campesino group based in Guerrero's sierra, Cabañas's Party of the Poor had long defended rural dwellers against cacique violence, and as a teacher in the Atoyac sierra, Cabañas had mobilized for basic reforms for the local population. Cabañas himself traced his early political consciousness to his years at the rural normal. "Those of us from Ayotzinapa, from the rural normal school, would go into all the little towns and everywhere organize demonstrations, bringing the campesinos along. Even when we were leaders in Ayotzinapa, we'd give clothes to the poor campesinos who did not have anything to wear and would approach us

at Ayotzinapa.” It was at the normal, he later declared, that their consciousness was born.⁷³

Genaro Vázquez, another Guerrerense schoolteacher (trained at the National Teachers School), organized a different armed group, the National Revolutionary Civic Association. A longtime defender of Guerrero’s campesinos, Vázquez was an early advocate for coffee, coconut, and sesame seed growers; spearheaded land invasions; coordinated struggles for municipal democratization; participated in Mexico City’s 1950s Revolutionary Teachers Movement; and mobilized against the repressive Guerrero governor Raúl Caballero Aburto in 1960. His political career shared many characteristics with those of Pablo Gómez and Arturo Gámiz; like them, Vázquez did not study at a rural normal, although Ayotzinapa students claim his legacy, vividly showcasing him along with Cabañas in their murals. Specifically citing the government’s decimation of the rural normal system, the flyers of the National Revolutionary Civic Association beckoned normalistas to “participate in the people’s struggle and avoid the next blow the government is planning against rural normales.”⁷⁴

That rural teachers like Vázquez and Cabañas commanded armed campesinos in Guerrero, inflicted army losses, and, for several years, defied federal operations to capture and subdue them inspired rural normalistas in no small measure because they offered a concrete example of retributive justice, direct action, and a revolutionary path to socialism. These teachers were living incarnations of education as consciousness, of the disquieting attitude that there was more to be done. Still, while many rural normalistas joined guerrilla groups, more commonly students aided them with supplies, provided cover, or facilitated transportation. Such students often acted of their own accord, hiding their deeds not only from school administrators but from the student governing council. Elsa Guzmán, a student from the rural normal of Tamazulapan, for example, recounted how she and another student aided the guerrillas:

We were in touch with the community of Jamiltepec, the people who had direct contact with Lucio Cabañas. But that was just two of us, and it had to be kept a secret. We filled a truckload with blankets and other stuff, claiming it was for the campesinos of Jamiltepec. We knew their true destination. . . . We later received a strong scolding from the student council when they found out the length to which we had gone, the extent to which we had exposed ourselves, because we had gone to meetings in Jamiltepec and had received a lot of death threats.⁷⁵

Intelligence agents also noted that collaboration was more the purview of individuals or small groups than a school-wide initiative.⁷⁶ In fact, while normalistas made constant proclamations in support of the guerrilla cause in Guerrero, they rejected accusations of outright participation. For example, students at the rural normal of *Tenería* declared, “We may have the same goals and ideals, but our type of struggle is completely different. Prof. Cabañas has chosen an armed movement, and we fight with ideas. In no moment—and this should be clear—have we tried to imitate him. So in our institution and in the rest in our country, there isn’t, as some of the regime’s authorities would have you believe, armament the guerrillas give us.”⁷⁷ In a public demonstration in Chiapas, normalistas from *Mactumactzá* explicitly decried the government branding them guerrillas and rabble-rousers, responding that they were simply students seeking justice for the people.⁷⁸ While much of the student connection was indeed at the level of ideals, as the normalistas claimed, it also behooved those linked to clandestine groups to deny any concrete collaboration since it not only elicited repression but bolstered the authorities’ portrayals of rural normales as guerrilla seedbeds.

Flyers from the urban guerrilla group the 23rd of September Communist League turned up in the hands of rural normalistas, and on at least two occasions the authorities detained individual normalistas for possession of modest caches of arms.⁷⁹ According to a May 1974 intelligence report, *Tenería* had many participants in the league.⁸⁰ But the relationship with this group was at best fraught. At the rural normal of *Tiripetío*, *Michoacán*, for example, the student assembly sought to avoid what they characterized as the league’s infiltration.⁸¹ No matter the degree of normalista engagement with armed struggle, the government constantly showcased connections and thus dismissed normalista protests as simple cover for violent subversives. The students charged that, in fact, the government sponsored infiltrators to sow chaos by distributing drugs and holding rowdy social gatherings. Aside from painting rural normales in a bad light, such actions, they denounced, disrupted *FECSM* efforts to cultivate political consciousness.⁸² In some cases, the students themselves identified these government agents and sought their expulsion.⁸³

For the broad student body, it was the guerrilla symbolism they most engaged with. The heroism of armed struggle provided a significant rallying cry, one normalistas evoked within a framework of heroic masculinity. At one demonstration, for example, students carried a banner reading, “Did my mother breed a man or a castrated being? Let’s open new guerrilla fronts.”⁸⁴ Women normalistas, too, called on their *compañeras* to adhere to this model

of bravery. In a demonstration in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, held in concert with the FECSM's annual convention, one female orator specifically appealed to women to incorporate themselves into the revolutionary process and join the guerrilla movement in Guerrero.⁸⁵

The mystique behind the guerrilla struggle was compelling. But, overall, the relationship between rural normales and armed movements was unstable. On the one hand, armed groups found in these institutions fertile recruiting grounds as well as spaces of refuge and support. On the other, the fact that groups like the MAR, the 23rd of September Communist League, and other clandestine organizations lacked a substantive popular base, were highly persecuted, and advocated risky, often-sensationalist actions made for a hotly contested and highly contentious relationship between the student body and insurgent members. Even guerrilla leaders like Cabañas cautioned students about the delicate nature of the path of armed struggle.⁸⁶ That the authorities used students' relationship to guerrillas as a justification for the military takeover of rural normales showed just how high the stakes ran. In 1976, for example, the army and police forces ended a strike at the rural normal of Atequiza, Jalisco, with a massive show of force. The justification was the school's supposed ties to subversives since one of its graduates had participated in the 1974 kidnapping of the first lady's father.⁸⁷ The rural normal of Aguilera, Durango, experienced a similar show of force when, on February 27, 1975, the military surrounded the school while the judicial police forced students out of the dorms—beating one who resisted. In this operation, security forces retrieved the fourteen buses the students had sequestered “but found no armament,” reported the intelligence officers, “only leftist propaganda.”⁸⁸ Throughout the country the authorities circulated lists of the “leaders and negative activists,” tracking normalistas so closely they listed their seat numbers on buses they took to attend a FECSM conference.⁸⁹ In other instances, the SEP attempted to stymie rural normalistas' contact with “campesinos and the people more generally” by ordering directors to disable schools' agricultural vehicles so students could not use them for transportation. When this action failed, the ministry appealed to transit police to detain all rural normal vehicles and prevent their circulation.⁹⁰ In Guerrero the SEP singled out Ayotzinapa normalistas attempting to organize the junior high school students in the neighboring community of Tixtla.⁹¹ The authorities did not stop at surveillance, and throughout the country students denounced the state's repression, including instances of kidnapping, beating, torture, and, in some cases, killing of normalistas.⁹²

In Guerrero, governor Rubén Figueroa unleashed an undeclared war against the rural normal of Ayotzinapa, threatening to turn the institution into a tourism school. “Those rabble-rousing teachers and students will pack their bags and get the hell out of Guerrero,” he declared.⁹³ Official disdain for Ayotzinapa continued in the years after Cabañas’s death, with Figueroa and the school principal jointly squashing student organizing. Even modest acts of student engagement with the local population ran up against the state’s wrath. During the summer of 1978, for example, a group of students sought to undertake a socioeconomic study of the region to better engage with community needs. The school director moved to prevent these efforts by notifying parents to come for their sons, who would otherwise be expelled. If they refused to leave, they would be forcibly removed, and their physical integrity could not be guaranteed. The principal also targeted any organizing links among students, teachers, and staff and decreed that if students missed more than two classes, they would lose the right to take their exams. For students, such measures revealed him to be a mere lackey of the governor. It was Figueroa who ultimately determined students’ fate, charged normalistas, a power the governor made clear by constantly sending the army to Ayotzinapa.⁹⁴

Without concrete figures about the number of normalistas who joined the guerrillas compared to students from other educational institutions, it is difficult to know for certain if they joined in greater proportion. No guerrilla group was made up exclusively of rural normalistas, and the MAR and the 23rd of September Communist League counted on numerous university students. However, some characteristics of rural normales, such as their nationwide web and the autonomy students enjoyed by living far from home, rendered them appealing sites for clandestine groups to both recruit and seek refuge. Their radical tradition, moreover, made many of their students receptive to guerrillas’ message. Significantly, unlike for other schools, the narrative that links rural normales with guerrillas persisted. The association between these schools and armed struggle was heightened by the fact that they continue to be hubs of protest, are located outside or on the periphery of urban centers, and have a predominantly poor student body that proudly claims the legacy of martyred rural teachers like Pablo Gómez, Arturo Gámiz, Genaro Vázquez, and Lucio Cabañas. While, of them, only Cabañas and Gómez had institutional ties to these schools, both students and the state invoke a connection, albeit in fundamentally different ways. For students, the links to guerrillas stand as a genealogy of resistance: from Pancho

Villa and Emiliano Zapata, whose revolutionary struggle brought land and education to the poor; to Lázaro Cárdenas's socialist teachers, who traveled to remote communities with a book in one arm and a rifle on the other; to the daring 1965 assault on the military barracks in Madera, Chihuahua; to the 1970s armed movement in Guerrero, rural normales represent centers of critical consciousness, the bulwarks of revolution whose restless students are the consequence of a besieged countryside (figure 8.1).

From the perspective of the state, rural normales were once heroic institutions that produced committed educators whose willingness to forgo their own well-being ushered in admirable national achievements. With time, however, they developed a sense of privilege that turned the schools into agitation hubs with students always demanding more than what a poor nation could possibly provide. In the process, normalistas squandered their educational opportunity with disruptive acts of protest, uselessly offered



FIGURE 8.1 Mural at the rural normal of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. The image of the rural teacher with a rifle over one arm and a book in the other is a common allusion to the generation of teachers of the 1920s and 1930s who had to contend with Cristero violence. Photograph by author.

their energies to workers and campesinos, and collaborated dangerously with subversives. For President Echeverría, who faced business-class ire for his attempts to revive policies of agrarian distribution and social spending, the militancy of these institutions deprived him of support that might shore up his credentials as a leftist reformer. The SEP thus continuously dismissed normalista demands, claiming they served the right's cause against the revolution.

**"IT IS IN YOUR HANDS TO SAVE OR
DESTROY THE RURAL NORMALES"**

As the 1970s wore on, the SEP increasingly sought to wrest from the FECSM the revolutionary mantle with which the student federation had long defended the rural normales. If the FECSM's ability to regroup and the SEP's recognition of a new rural normal in Amilcingo represented a change from Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's clampdown, over the course of Echeverría's administration, policy toward rural normalistas would harden. Initial concessions had not succeeded in taming the FECSM. On the contrary, within its ranks and within the rural normales more generally, guerrilla groups found support as well as fertile recruiting ground. These tendencies the SEP addressed by presenting itself as the agency willing to implement the revolution's mandate of popular education against a student organization that harbored privileged, reckless activists who ultimately, went its logic, served a fascist cause.

The SEP's negotiations with the FECSM show an effort to isolate and portray it as an entity controlled by outside interests, ones intent on corrupting the consciousness of future teachers and endangering the rural normales' very existence.⁹⁵ In a March 27, 1976, letter to rural normalistas, their parents, and all education workers, the secretary and undersecretary of rural normal education, together with the principals of sixteen rural normales, attempted to walk back earlier concessions. The declaration honed in on the federation's demand for a flexible absence policy for its national delegates, characterizing it as "exaggerated" and "bourgeois." These types of privileges, stated the letter, would lead students "to forget their class origin and commitment to the people." Pitting the students against the poor communities from which they came, it further asserted that such arrangements took "resources away from campesinos" since low-quality teachers represented a "negation of educational services to the children of indigenous and campesino communities."⁹⁶ In the months to come, SEP language acquired a particularly scathing tone. For example, when responding to a FECSM letter demanding

compliance with earlier agreements, officials caricatured their petition, declaring, “How is it possible that students from rural normales, *real students*, are okay with a demand list that includes the privilege of leaders not to study and yet receive credit almost as a mere formality? This, when others must comply with all their obligations.”⁹⁷ It was student organizing, argued school officials over and over, that most threatened and corrupted the existence of rural normales, and neither they nor teachers had “the right to endanger the institutions that are the patrimony of generations of campesino children.”⁹⁸

In a specific attack on normalistas’ propensity to join popular struggles, the SEP declared that the duty of student revolutionaries was to study. How could they possibly privilege “daily contact with culturally marginalized groups” over book and classroom-based learning? Would such contact enable “a command over mathematics, the fundamental tool of thought and discovery, and the confirmation of nature’s laws?” Rather than participate in demonstrations or give speeches that show “a superficial and dogmatic view of revolutionary theory,” students should “learn the principles and laws of physics, chemistry, and the natural sciences that will permit a clear vision of the universe, of man, and of how phenomena unfold.”⁹⁹ What could normalistas possibly learn from the people, chastised another SEP declaration, when it was their job as future teachers to elevate that population’s general cultural level?¹⁰⁰

Education authorities thus expressed their concern for the peasantry, a sector that deserved good teachers, whose commitment to academics would keep them in the classroom and away from disorderly popular mobilizations. For a regime claiming the legacy of Cárdenas, who had vindicated teachers as community leaders, this position was, to say the least, ironic. But officials went even further in their appropriation of the revolutionary mantle. The SEP lumped normalistas with the regime’s right-wing foes, accusing them of aiding fascism. Echeverría’s attempted international leadership of Third World nations further gave the SEP license to tout its revolutionary credentials as it implored students to adopt “the system of *work and study* that existed in nations that stand at the revolution’s vanguard.”¹⁰¹ This position the minister of normal education contrasted with rural normalistas’ “ignorance, irresponsibility, and childlike behavior,” which would ultimately hurt their schools and was blind to the ways in which fascism had been imposed in many parts of Latin America.¹⁰² “*It is in your hands to save or destroy the rural normales,*” the minister later warned the FECSM. “*Choose one road or the other, but if you select the wrong one and our institutions are abolished, don’t blame others; you will be the only ones responsible.*”¹⁰³ Despite the new twist,

the SEP's narrative was familiar. The deficiencies in rural education were of the normalistas' own making. Their actions generated chaos and anarchy and stymied teacher quality, ignored a service they owed the nation, and demonstrated a disregard of their own privilege given the massively coveted spaces at rural normales.

But the real threat to rural normales was structural. By the 1970s teachers' demographic background—where they were from, where they trained, and where they worked—was increasingly urban. The number of private and state-funded teacher-training institutions had grown since the 1960s, their presence confined almost exclusively to urban areas. These new normales had proliferated in response to an increased demand for teachers as the SEP expanded elementary and secondary education and offered greater opportunities for professional advancement, making teaching a more attractive profession.¹⁰⁴ In the 1970s, especially as the economic crisis unfolded, there was a glut of teachers—everywhere except in the countryside.

“CONSTANT REFORM”

Early on, Echeverría declared that Mexico's revolution demanded “constant reform” and that within that process education “holds a special place.”¹⁰⁵ President Díaz Ordaz had already identified education as in need of attention, but Echeverría's approach differed. While Díaz Ordaz had sought to starve universities into submission, his successor courted them through financial largess.¹⁰⁶ Echeverría's administration both increased funding for existing institutions, like the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and created new ones, such as the Autonomous Metropolitan University, a decentralized system with a campus in each of Mexico City's cardinal points. The latter both provided university education for an expanding student body and opened a slew of stable teaching and research positions for intellectuals and scholars.¹⁰⁷ Echeverría also funded new high school-level institutions like the Academy of Sciences and Humanities—schools linked to the National Autonomous University of Mexico whose graduates gained automatic entrance to the university—and the high school academies meant to provide specialized degrees to those entering the workforce rather than the university.

The SEP also undertook changes at other educational levels, although these were less substantive. It rolled out a new elementary school textbook program that updated materials issued by President Adolfo López Mateos a decade earlier. These new texts aligned the curriculum with the regime's

democratic opening and emphasized critical thinking, student potential for creativity, and an active learning process.¹⁰⁸ To be meaningful, such changes would have required a concomitant transformation in the normal system that equipped teachers with the tools to appropriately implement the pedagogical shift. But at normales this change took place at best superficially since few instructors there were themselves qualified to teach the new methods.¹⁰⁹ Needless to say, this process reinforced a number of academic deficiencies.

Echeverría in his first state-of-the-union address, would undergo a process of permanent renovation.¹¹⁰ At teacher-training schools, this translated into a series of precipitous curricular changes that often worked at cross-purposes. In 1972, for example, the education authorities turned their attention to the status of a teaching degree, a long-standing question whose resolution had been kicked down the road for three decades. Unlike professional training programs in law, medicine, or engineering that required a bachillerato (a high school diploma), students could enter a normal straight from junior high school.¹¹¹ This difference in schooling partly accounted for teachers' lower pay and status. The 1972 reform made it possible for students to receive their bachillerato alongside their teaching degree. To meet such standards, normales increased the number of required subjects, a change that proportionally decreased courses in pedagogy.¹¹² With this reform, instructors at normales were expected to possess expertise in a particular field or fields (since they often taught more than one discipline) as well as the pedagogical methods of that field. The dust had barely settled on this reform when, in 1975, the SEP implemented an additional change that reduced the number of requirements by consolidating subject areas.¹¹³ Whereas the 1972 legislation emphasized subject knowledge, the SEP now brought the focus back to teaching methods.¹¹⁴

These reforms, which, like others, took place without the educators themselves being consulted, generated chaos, especially since they began a mere three years after the 1969 restructuring. The Revolutionary Teachers Movement, a longtime PRI challenger, issued a proclamation that put it best:

Normal education is in the utmost state of confusion and contradictions: confusion because teachers and students ignore the programmatic content of many of the subjects they are to learn and develop in the coming academic year . . . [and] because a good portion of the teaching body does not know with certainty which subject they will impart, if it will be in their area of specialization or a different one. But they will be obliged to im-

part it owing to the continuously touted duty to serve. It is contradictory because two different study plans are being carried out on the same campus, the 1969 and the 1972 restructured one.¹¹⁵

This critique highlighted a longtime SEP tendency in which each presidential administration unveiled a new education policy, which, time and again, SEP bureaucrats had elaborated with no input from teachers.¹¹⁶ No wonder these reforms did not achieve their objectives, condemned a normalista from Tenerife: “the grand pedagogues get together . . . and decide everything a priori—programs, texts, methods, systems.”¹¹⁷ More often than not, such policies addressed symptoms of larger structural problems, especially in the countryside. “It’s like treating cancer with an aspirin,” commented an op-ed on the reforms, “the headache will be gone, but the patient will never be cured.”¹¹⁸ Without a profound transformation of the system itself, student teachers experienced the changes as a haphazard reshuffling of class time, one “that takes hours from one subject to give to another, squeezing into three years what should be distributed into eight or nine.” From a labor perspective, the reforms were even more problematic since “electronic minds” put it on teachers to resolve the problems of education through “appeals to the spirit of sacrifice and the apostolic nature of teaching.”¹¹⁹ In the meantime, “we are subject to the same market laws as any other worker who sells their labor power,” continued the normalista from Tenerife, “we sell our intellectual work. We can’t be asked for extreme sacrifice for grand endeavors that mask sad realities.”¹²⁰

During the 1970s, the SEP’s professionalization strategy added academic pedigree but did little in terms of substance. In fact, the logic was often contradictory. One of the justifications for the 1969 separation between secundaria and teacher training had been that, with no obvious relationship between each cycle, an abundance of students enrolled in rural normales not because of a desire to teach but because they sought a junior high school education. Once they completed the secundaria years, rather than continue at the normal, these students transferred to other educational institutions. Rural normales, argued the architects of the 1969 reform, should be the sole domain of those with an inner love for teaching—the much-touted *vocación* or *mística*. And yet the 1972 reform that established the simultaneous normal-bachillerato track held as its logic that those with a calling to teach could pursue other careers requiring a high school degree. Aside from the dizzying curricular back-and-forth these changes implied for normales’ curriculum, rather than increasing the prestige of a teaching degree, the

change reinforced its inferior status vis-à-vis other professions since it basically equated a teacher-training degree with a high school education. Not only did it not improve the academic quality of normal education, but it triggered a mad rush for *títulos* (degrees), a tendency that did much to raise individual pay but little for teachers' overall collective status and material security.¹²¹ With the *bachillerato* degree, graduates of normales could pursue a *licenciatura*—roughly equivalent to a college degree—in education or in other careers. Those opting for the latter could follow it with a master's and a PhD, making them eligible for high-ranking positions at teacher-training schools or in the SEP administration.

With this change, the number of normales increased, especially in urban areas, contributing to an ever-growing sector of educators who were urban in both background and training. Many teachers already in service pursued their advanced degrees at the National Teachers School or the Higher Normal School of Mexico, where 80 percent of the student body were part-time students gaining their specialization during the summer months.¹²² With these degrees, teachers could improve their pay and status, an upward mobility that for rural educators meant moving to the cities. The countryside would thus continue to lack teachers.

And yet the rural normal model was increasingly abandoned. Instead, nine Regional Normal Teaching Centers were built, as were thirty Experimental Normal Schools, improvised teacher-training schools that required far fewer resources than formal institutions.¹²³ Moreover, the agricultural component, one of the curricular aspects that most differentiated rural normalistas from urban ones, decreased amid the changing course requirements implemented by the 1972 and 1975 legislation. This occurred, first, because the new reforms reduced the number of required hours for agricultural classes and made them electives within normalistas' three broad areas of study; and, second, because, after the 1969 restructuring, much of the focus on farming became concentrated in the institutions that had been transformed from rural normales into technical agricultural schools. These schools drew the bulk of agricultural teachers.¹²⁴

The 1969 reform that in rural normales separated the *secundaria* and professional training added an additional hurdle for students from the poorest, most marginal areas. Given the high demand, gaining a spot at these schools had long been difficult. The 1969 reform raised the bar since applicants now had to finish both elementary and junior high school before applying. In a country where, in 1971, only 9 percent of the children from rural

areas finished elementary school (compared to 54 percent in the cities), this was no small feat.¹²⁵ The socioeconomic characteristics of the eligible applicant pool likely went up since, for the nation's poorest campesino youth, a junior high school education would remain elusive. Accentuating this trend was the SEP's 1974 cancellation of the *pase automático* (automatic acceptance) for graduates of technical agricultural schools, one of the few concessions made to the FECSM during the 1969 restructuring. Thus, the fourteen schools meant to provide a secundaria education for the country's rural poor now curtailed the opportunity for upward mobility offered by a teaching career. Moreover, despite previous FECSM efforts to change the nature of the entrance exam, the SEP preserved a single entrance exam for rural and urban normales, a test that privileged abstract over practical or technical knowledge.

The Echeverría administration did adopt a patchwork of programs to address the shortage of teachers in the countryside. The SEP created new incentives for those who taught in the countryside, including salary benefits, housing, farming plots, opportunities for professional development, and promotions for those who devoted more years to rural communities.¹²⁶ It also granted some teaching positions to the communities themselves so that the funding would stay with the locality rather than follow the teachers, so many of whom transferred after only a few years in remote communities. In addition, the SEP instituted the position of community promoter, by which youth with a secundaria education could receive intensive course training to then teach in areas too small to build a school. This policy was especially significant for indigenous communities, whose ownership of the position began an ever-slight reversal in the SEP's long-standing acculturation model.¹²⁷

But education policy did little to address the country's grave social problems. The economic crisis of the 1970s accentuated the inequality that had characterized the Mexican miracle, and Echeverría's increased spending improved neither education's quality nor access to it.¹²⁸ The benefits continued to accrue to the urban upper and middle class, a tendency reflected in the fact that higher education served only 4 percent of the school-age population but absorbed 20 percent of school spending.¹²⁹ President José López Portillo (1976–82) continued Echeverría's policy; during his sexenio, enrollment rates at universities increased 90.6 percent while those at elementary schools grew only 34.4 percent.¹³⁰ Between 1970 and 1976, the number of institutions of higher learning went from 400 to 646.¹³¹ By the early 1980s, the poorest rural and indigenous communities invested proportionately greater

amounts in their children's education.¹³² Overall, education became, as one study put it, "a relatively inexpensive means to compensate for the lack of opportunities of social mobility outside the school."¹³³

FOR MANY OBSERVERS, the 1968 state violence at Tlatelolco marked the end of the revolutionary process the PRI had claimed to carry out over the course of four decades. Some went as far as reevaluating the nature of the 1910 revolution itself. Had it indeed marked the end of a dictatorship that ushered in a social justice project? Or had it merely transformed Porfirio Díaz's rule into a single-party dictatorship? As Echeverría sought desperately to convince the population of the former, guerrilla groups acted under the logic of the latter.

Rural normales, which encapsulated the principles of redistributive justice, state consolidation, and upward mobility, complicated this dichotomy. Systemically, they provided an outlet for a besieged rural population by offering campesino youth a chance to study and to eventually receive a stable, if modest, income. That this was a generational improvement in their livelihood made rural normales a tangible revolutionary gain. For most graduates, this process of upward mobility produced a life of political quiescence, and, ironically, constituted a stepping-stone to urban life that fortified the PRI itself. As Arturo Gámiz, the rural teacher-turned-guerrilla, lamented about normalistas' own education, "For every one instructor who imparts revolutionary content, a hundred will teach reactionary lessons."¹³⁴

Subjectively, however, rural normales' uniquely radical genealogy made their pupils' training as much political as academic. The revolutionary regime's original emphasis that teachers graduate as community leaders first had the effect of producing student leaders within the rural normales themselves. The boarding-school structure accentuated this tendency since it provided a context in which it was easier to organize the student body than it would be to mobilize the population in rural communities. Given the constant besieging of rural normales, individual advancement in fact depended on collective struggle to defend the integrity of the institutions. This process itself awakened a radical consciousness in a number significant enough to undermine the politically palliative effects of the state's education project. In the long-term process of state formation, consolidation, and legitimacy, this was an unintended lesson of revolution.