Mexico's Forgotten Dirty War: Guerrero's Student, Worker, and *Campesino* Activism

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On December 3, 1974, two hundred students in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, protested against state and federal police, demanding the death of their state senator Rubén Figueroa. On the previous day, Figueroa had been rescued by the government after being kidnapped by Marxist guerrillas and held for ransom. In this process, the police shot and killed Lucio Cabañas, the guerrilla leader who held Figueroa hostage. Cabañas was labeled a domestic terrorist and bandit by the Mexican state, and was referred to as Mexico's most iconic guerrilla by the CIA. Students at the *Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero* resisted and attacked political figures like Figueroa by producing images that included phrases such as, "*Muera Figueroa*" (Die Figueroa) and "*Figueroa es traidor*" (Figueroa is a traitor).[1] Such demonstrations reveal the hostile relationship between Guerrero students and politicians as the youth pledged allegiance to this local guerrilla leader. These activists protested and sought vengeance against their state's established political leaders and police forces. To university students and professors, as well as other sectors of Guerrero's society, Cabañas' death felt like a personal loss and direct attack. This student action demonstrates a disconnect from local and federal government, as students clearly rejected the legitimacy of political figures. Through their protest, students identified themselves as noncombatants associated with Guerrero's insurgent movement during the Dirty War.

While Americans remember the Cold War era for the ever-looming threat of nuclear annihilation, many Mexicans faced the threat of an internal Dirty War from their government. The term Dirty War is commonly applied to Latin American countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, but during the 1960s and 1970s, Mexico experienced its own unconventional war in which

[1] Información de Chilpancingo, December 2, 1974, Caja: 1066 Exp. 4, AGN Dirección General de Investigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.

the state combated insurgencies and violated human rights against its citizens.[2] However, these atrocities are not widely known because Mexico seemed to be Latin America's model of democratic stability during the Cold War. Although terror became a tool to establish the authority of central and state governments in locations like Guerrero, Mexico's Dirty War was unique because it did not experience a military coup or U.S. intervention. The dozens of insurgencies that sparked throughout the countryside and urban areas directly responded to Mexico's visible income disparity and state terror. Beginning in 1965 in Madera, Chihuahua, the counter-insurgency campaigns of the Mexican government demonstrated its violent response that was later felt throughout the nation, and especially Guerrero. However, the political organization of intellectuals, workers, and peasants created a counter-dialogue in Guerrero that produced an attractive alternative to issues of injustice that were perpetrated by their government.

Guerrero, a mostly agricultural and indigenous state, is crucial to Dirty War history because of its radicalism. It was the home to two separate armed insurgent groups that waged war against the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) in response to local massacres during the 1960s. These groups were the *Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria* (National Revolutionary Civic Association, ACNR) led by Genaro Vásquez, and the *Partido de los Pobres* (Party of the Poor, PDLP) led by Lucio Cabañas. Cabañas and Vásquez ultimately became Mexico's most famous and iconic guerillas of the post-revolution era. As local leaders of Guerrero's armed insurgencies, both men were once rural school teachers and civic leaders who fought against corruption. Vásquez and Cabañas both embraced the ideas of Karl Marx and Mexican revolutionary leaders like Emiliano Zapata in the late 1960s, which ultimately led to Guerrero's armed rebellions. Another common and significant denominator that these men and their groups shared was a social base that supported and contributed to their cause. During the Dirty War, this base was composed of Guerrerense noncombatants that included students,

[2] Adela Cedillo and Fernando Calderon, "*Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982.*" (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

professors, unionized workers, and rural community members. By expanding upon the traditional examination of Dirty War narratives, I explore the crucial contributions of noncombatants in the insurgent efforts that battled the government in Guerrero. This article highlights the actions of academics, workers, and community members who participated in Guerrero's Dirty War. These long-overlooked noncombatants aided the armed insurgent struggles through essential actions such as fundraising, echoing their voice, and shielding themselves from the government.

Dirty War Narratives

Historians have traditionally focused on guerilla ideology during the 1960s and 1970s in Guerrero and the effects of state violence against combatants, but have failed to provide noncombatants with an active voice during Mexico's Dirty War. Historians continue to debate the political attributes of Guerrero's armed movement and its violent role. Much of the previous scholarship focused on the revolutionary program that Cabañas attempted to implement. The late Carlos Montemayor argued that Cabañas was a continuation of the Zapatista agrarian movement and did so by linking him to his uncle who was a Zapatista soldier during the revolution.[3] However, in a more recent interpretation, O'Neill Blacker-Hanson attempts to trans-nationalize Cabañas' thoughts by identifying his flawed understanding of the thinkers he admired.[4] The debate over ideas and practice focuses on individuals like Cabañas and fails to mention the political programs of those who did not participate in direct combat. Since noncombatants contributed to the PDLP and ACNR struggles, they should also be examined by analyzing their symbolic actions. Alexander Aviña explains that the insurgencies demanded a new government which would fulfill the promises of the Mexican Revolution but which

[3] Francisco Avila Coronel, "Historiografía de la guerrilla del Partido de Los Pobres (PDLP) (Atoyac, Guerrero)," *Secuencia* 95 (2016).
[4] O' Neill Blacker-Hanson, "The Intellectual Roots of Guerrero's Cold War Rebellion," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 18, no. 2 (2012), 110.

would also result in state violence.[5] Aviña focuses on the state and the guerrilla insurgents, not citizens who resisted the violence. An examination of noncombatants' actions furthers the focus on the Dirty War memory by insisting on a historiographical shift. This shift is meant to illuminate the agency of Guerrerense citizens who contributed without direct combat against the government.

Violence

The PRI's use of state-sponsored violence produced guerrilla insurgencies throughout the country and pushed noncombatants to support the armed rebels. The most infamous case of state violence that is remembered among both Mexicans and Americans during Mexico's Dirty War was the Tlatelolco Massacre. In 1968, students from *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico*, (Mexico's National Autonomous University, UNAM) protested and called for the increased funding for social programs while Mexico hosted the Olympic games. In response, Luis Echeverria, Mexico's most powerful cabinet member after the president, (and president of the country from 1970-1976) ordered state police to open fire and kill hundreds of unarmed university students. This act illuminated the PRI's brutal use of force on its citizens. The PRI's willingness to slaughter urban youth while the world watched, became a preview of what would continue to happen in rural areas of Mexico. The state experienced a series of massacres during the 1960s, including assaults in Chilpancingo (1960), Iguala (1962), Acapulco and Atoyac de Álvarez (1967). In a truth commission that confirmed the disappearance of 800 people in Mexico during the Dirty War era, 600 of these individuals disappeared in Guerrero alone.[6] A large number of those missing were noncombatants who the federal government felt were possible associates of the guerrillas. The escalation of government terror changed peaceful activists to become armed insurgents and embrace a new route for political change. However, Guerrero's armed guerrillas were not the only radicals who rebelled against their government. Students, workers,

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[5] Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.
[6] Peter Watt, "Mexico's Secret Dirty War," *Sincronía* 1 no. 2 (2010).

and rural community members sided with Mexico's new armed rebels to make a clandestine war possible in Guerrero.[7]

The Radical Producer

Guerrero's schools served as a key seedbed for radicals. A very leftist institution such as the Ayotzinapa rural teacher training school educated men like Cabañas and Vásquez and propagated activists who became their supporters. Their efforts as civic leaders in the 1960s and armed insurgencies in later years explained the radicalization process of Guerrero's academics and workers. Students who gathered in classes and listened to *Radio Havana* were inspired by the accomplishments of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.[8] They were welcomed and invited by the PDLP to be a part of the movement that was meant to mirror Cuba's revolution. Through direct communication with the *Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero* (Autonomous University of Guerrero, UAG) the insurgents reached students using rhetoric such "*cada forma de lucha es un brazo del pueblo*" (every form of struggle is an arm of the people).[9] Evidently, university students responded to the PDLP messages. Educated individuals like medical student Ricardo Rodriguez joined the PDLP guerrillas by becoming their doctor.[10] Educational institutions in Guerrero had established themselves as noncombatant sites where radical ideologies could influence students to become armed insurgents and activists.

The government's presence in universities and military intervention in Guerrero caused students to resist the state's surveillance culture and to organize and demand personal autonomy. As the countryside suffered from underdevelopment, lack of education, and poor infrastructure, it was also targeted by early *narcos* (drug traffickers) because it had some of Mexico's most fertile agricultural land. The government was able to establish

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[7] Aviña, *Specters of Revolution,* 110.
[8] Gerardo Tort, dir., *La guerrilla y la esperañza: Lucio Cabañas* (Mexico: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 2005), DVD.
[9] Armed Revolutionary Organizations of Mexico. January 20, 1974, MSS 0523 Series 19 reel 8 folder 22, Mandeville Special Collections Library University of California San Diego.
[10] Aviña, *Specters of Revolution,* 146.

a military presence due to the growth of poppy seed, marijuana, and early *narcos* in Guerrero. It was this drug manufacturing reality that gave the state the excuse to occupy the countryside with troops who waged an early war on drugs. These troops were also used to subdue the state's political opponents, whether it was armed rebels or union activists.[11]As the countryside suffered from underdevelopment, insufficient educational opportunities, and poor infrastructure, the expensive military drug war was counterproductive to student and Guerrerense aspirations for their state. The military's presence and government spending did not address the social and economic issues Guerrero dealt with. These issues were reported by local newspapers that published weekly stories on rural communities whose populations were suffering from starvation and disease caused by malnutrition.[12] Students not only critiqued their government for the lack of social spending, but also for intervening in university politics—especially their free speech and political affiliations. The Mexican government sent clandestine groups known as the *Halcones* (Falcons) who confronted leftist groups to provoke and agitate students until the infiltrators were discovered in 1968.[13] This state tactic influenced student hostility towards the PRI and the local government as a result of violating constitutional law and demanded the university's autonomy.[14] To battle this unconstitutional attack from the state, the UAG formed the *Congreso Estudiantil Guerrerense* (The First Guerrerense Student Congress), which aimed to institutionalize reforms through the networks of universities in the state and country.[15] As the federal government continued to intervene in

[11] Alexander Aviña, "Mexico's Long Dirty War: The Origins of Mexico's Drug on Wars Can Be Found In the Mexican State's Decades-Long Attack on Popular Movements Advocating for Social and Economic Justice," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 48 no. 2 (2016), 128.
[12] Estado de Guerrero, September 22, 1969, Caja: 549 Exp. 3, AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.
[13] National Archives, RG 59 1970-73 Pol 23-8 Mex, Box 2476 http://www.gwu.edu/,- nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/index2.htm
[14] Estado de Guerrero September 9, 1969, Caja: 549 Exp. 3, AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.
[15] Estado de Guerrero, May 16, 1969, Caja: 549 Exp. 3, AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.

student's interests in Guerrero, they reacted to preserve their constitutional rights to autonomy and refused to accept the PRI's ever-looming presence.

New Revolution and New Symbolism

Students around Mexico began to transcend the nation's traditional revolutionary views and revolutionary symbolism to shift to a more militant ideology in support of the guerrillas. Students even went as far as replacing Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa's images with Mao Zedong and Che Guevara.[16] The images were visible in Mexico City during the 1968 protests as student movements attached themselves to a more global program that identified with transnational ideas like Marxism. In Guerrero, Marxist militants, like Lucio Cabañas became a new revolutionary symbol to students. Immediately after his death, the UAG responded with cheers from students that shouted, "*¡Viva Lucio Cabañas!*" and, "Down with Rubén Figueroa!" Guerrero's student reaction demonstrated an allegiance to Marxist and populist elements. Students made an effort to stop public transportation and cars and, when stopping the automobiles, students wrote anti-Figueroa and anti-PRI slogans that called for his death.[17] Only months later, these murals began to appear across universities. The most famous mural appeared at Ayotzinapa. In this mural, Cabañas is armed with a gun and among him are Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Guevara.[18] The gun Cabañas holds was purposely placed to inspire an approach the Mexican Communist Party did not agree with but was necessary for their struggle. The use of symbolic imagery echoed the presence of radical insurgents in the universities. Guerrerense students embraced foreign ideas that motivated a new sense of radicalism.

Guerrero's university faculty and student body also served the armed insurgents by providing a platform where the ideas of

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[16] Gerard J. De Groot, *Student protest: the sixties and after* (London: Longman 1998) 68. De Groot indicates Mexico's most popular revolutionary heroes.
[17] Estado de Guerrero, December 2, 1974, Caja: 1066 Exp. 3, AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.
[18] O' Neill Blacker-Hanson, "The Intellectual Roots of Guerrero's Cold War Rebellion", *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 18:2, 101.

isolated guerrillas were heard in urban classrooms. Professors Felix Hoyo and Alejandra Cardenas gave Cabañas and the armed leftists a voice in Guerrero's universities. Hoyo's and Cardena's willingness to contribute to the insurgent cause legitimized the guerrillas at the university. The professors went as far as linking academic theory to the insurgents' motives. Along with other university faculty, Cardenas shared her expertise on Marxist theory with twenty to thirty combatants in February of 1974.[19] Cardenas and Hoyo not only disseminated their knowledge with radical combatants, but were also responsible for organizing students at the UAG and producing Marxist networks in university settings. The UAG was not the only educational institution with academics who spread the message from the PDLP. In 1969, a school teacher from Ayotzinapa, Vicente Estrada Vega, provided the PDLP insurgents a link to other radical groups like the Ho Chi Minh section of the Communist Spartacist League and ex Jaramllistas (1950s insurgent movement) from Morelos (Guerrero's neighboring state).[20] Echoing Guerrero's guerrilla ideology continued even after Cabañas' death. On December 10, 1974, state documents reported that radical leftists who attended the UAG organized to remove the university rector. The Political and Social Investigations Department of Mexico alleged that students were attempting to elect a rector who had a similar ideology and campaigned for Pablo Sandoval Ramirez.[21] Sandoval Ramirez was a well-known leftist and a known ally to the PDLP insurgents. In Guerrero, academics had the opportunity to influence and gain access as insurgents into areas the guerrillas could not enter.

Union Activity

While there was unity between the students and the guerrillas, Guerrerense unions did not have a homogeneous view for supporting the insurgencies or their government. Although unions participated alongside students in rallies and protests throughout

[19] O' Neil Blacker-Hanson, "Cold War in the Countryside: Conflict in Guerrero, Mexico," *The Americas* 66, no. 02 (2009), 104.
[20] Aviña, *Specters of Revolution,* 146.
[21] Estado de Guerrero, December 10, 1974, Caja: 1066 Exp. 3, AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.

the state, union-documented statements also displayed that the guerrillas were seen more as a burden than a blessing to Guerrero's citizens. The rise in visible violence and the media's coverage of the insurgents that referred to guerrillas as terrorists presented a major issue in Guerrero. The ideology of all noncombatants was obviously molded by their environmental conditions and Mexico's use of state violence combined with armed insurgents represented a never-ending sequence of terror for many of Guerrero's citizens. Many of the region's working class citizens (like in most of the country) understood the PRI to be the only feasible solution to the overwhelming military presence and radical guerrilla groups that plagued their state. Guerrero's working class still viewed the PRI as the product of the Mexican Revolution, and not coincidentally it was one of the only legitimate political institutions people were loyal to.[22] While monopolizing political realms since the 1920s, the PRI expanded social programs in education and implemented agricultural reforms to remind Mexicans why it was Mexico's revolutionary party.[23] Noncombatant union members who aimed to restructure working conditions and advocated for federal investment understood the PRI as a political power broker that could not be avoided during demands for change. Unions at the university of Guerrero looked to their PRI-controlled state as they demanded better pay. The University Service Union announced its protest and proposal to the state for a 22 percent raise for its workers while being led by Pablo Sandoval Ramirez. Even someone like Ramirez, who served as an ally to the guerrillas and organized Marxist seminars, worked in the confined system built by the PRI.[24] Mexico's most popular middle-class institutions, the National Confederations of Political Organizations CNOP, a PRI branch composed of the working class, openly declared their faith in the PRI and its ability to restore stability in Guerrero.[25] The

[22] Alan Knight, "The Myth of the Mexican Revolution," *Past & Present* 209 no. 1 (2010), 226.
[23] Peter Watt, "Mexico's Secret Dirty War" *Sincronía,* 1 no. 2 (2010).
[24] Estado de Guerrero. Información de Acapulco, November 11, 1974, Caja 1066 exp. 3, AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.
[25] Estado de Guerrero, September 20, 1969, Caja 549 exp. 3 AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.

PRI's claim to legitimate authority signified to noncombatants, like members of the CNOP, that the only feasible route toward peace was to continue to work for the state's power broker.

Although some unionized workers remained loyal or continued to work with the PRI, many of Guerrero's union workers organized in urban areas to expand the insurgent effort. Much like groups at universities, unions served as an urban base for the armed rebels. Union workers provided the isolated guerillas with a link to commercialized areas like Acapulco, and contributed to the ACNR growth to deliver information, money, and even weaponry. Their support network consisted of a wide variety of trades and union members. Workers in Guerrero's public works union, Acapulco Taxi Association, the hotel service workers union, administrative workers for state service union, street vendors, as well as local merchants had sectors in their unions that aided the guerrilla efforts against the PRI through finances and information.[26] These workers played a unique role in funding the guerrilla project while not taking part in combat in urban areas. Unions also provided an urban link that empowered PDLP guerrillas through politically organizing Guerrerense people. Guerrerense worker efforts from the *Unión Revolución de los Ayutlenses* (Ayutla Revolutionary Union) allowed for armed insurgent action to be discussed in urbanized political debates. In 1974, an Ayutla Revolutionary Union leader and self-proclaimed supporter of the Cabañas cause, Carlos Santamaría, became a political candidate for governor of Guerrero.[27] Guerrerense union workers contributed through financial and political means. Many workers in Guerrero actively supported guerrilla activity to battle the PRI and legitimize a new revolution that was establishing itself in Guerrero.

Communities

Lastly, community members in rural areas were also a significant group who contributed to the PDLP and ACNR efforts against the PRI by producing a space where the insurgents could

[26] Laura Castellanos and Alejandro Jiménez Martín Del Campo, *México Armado 1943-1981* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 2016), 139.
[27] Estado de Guerrero, November 13, 1974, Caja: 1066 Exp. 3, AGN Dirección General de inestigaciónes Políticas y Sociales.

remain clandestine. The homes and communities opened up to the ACNR and PDLP at different times, accessible through the active participation of community members who supported these two groups. Rural community members offered their homes to the armed insurgents even after Mexico City's daily newspaper *El Universal* noted that there was "great alarm" among local *campesinos* in Atoyac. These areas were affected by the rise of interrogations and "risk of torture" by police for information in August of 1972.[28] Along the coast of the mountainous region in Atoyac, peasants continued to have beneficial ties and relationships with many of the combatants. These relationships translated into a series of networks that contributed information to the insurgents. A PDLP guerrilla claimed that their rural base of support were the "eyes and the heart of the guerrilla organization."[29] Rural communities sometimes organized "committees of struggle," which aided the insurgents with food and additional combatants if needed. The ACNR benefited from similar support during their campaign as well. Rural communities who were previously ACG supporters in the Sierra Madre del Sur provided shelter, food, and housing while the military searched for the guerrillas.[30]

Noncombatant rural community members who supported the guerrillas continuously made it possible for the PDLP and ACNR to successfully avoid military and police forces. In a series of published interviews conducted in the Guerrerense town of Taxco, scholars have noted that armed ACNR guerrillas were present in these local towns. In these scenarios townspeople demonstrated direct action that contributed to the guerrilla cause. In one of these interviews a local member stated, "the people cared a lot about Vásquez because he gave them money and help, this is why he has so much help. He has spies everywhere."[31] During Cabañas' death in Guerrero folk music was produced about him spreading wealth

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[28] National Archives, RG 59 1970-73Pol 23-9 Mex http://www.gwu.edu/,-nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/index2.htm.
[29] AGN, DFS 100-10-16-4 Legajo 8, 58-59, "Interrogation of Raul Castañeda Peñaloza" "An individual tortured and disappeared" Found in Avina, Specters of Revolution, 144.
[30] Aviña, *Specters of Revolution,*11.
[31] "Interviews conducted by A.'el Madrid". Ovaciones, February 3, 1972.

to the impoverished people of his state.[32] The emergence of Mexico's heroic figure drove noncombatant communities to actively participate in this war against the PRI. Until his death Guerrero's hero avoided the Mexican military with great success because of his popularity in rural regions. Throughout a three-week period that began on June 26, 1974, the Mexican military failed to find any PDLP guerrillas while sending over two-thousand troops in search for Senator Figueroa and Cabañas.[33] Community members propagated a culture that picked a side in this Dirty War and placed themselves in the insurgent battle against the PRI by shielding the guerrillas from intruding military and police forces.

After making several propositions to solve the guerrilla problem in Guerrero, a *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (Federal Security Directorate) officer stated, "If the above is not possible, we suggest a counter-guerrilla campaign, which would consist of direct actions realized against collaborators and sympathizers of the Party of the Poor —against them personally or against their properties— The object is to disrupt and break apart the Party's intelligence, supply, and recruitment networks."[34] This statement may be more related to the PRI and the police, but it speaks to the significance of noncombatants in the Dirty War, and identifies the threat they presented to the Mexican government. Future research on the Mexican government's actions and the words in Luis de la Barreda Morena's report will further illuminate the role of noncombatants in an insurgency after seriously questioning the significance of their appearance on the report. Various sectors of Guerrerense people demonstrated that they were a threat to combating the PRI without ever picking up a weapon. The existence of noncombatant threats in Guerrero symbolizes that there were many more radicals in the state than previously thought.

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[32] Mastrangelo, Joseph. "Mexico Says Troops Killed Rebel Chief." *The Washington Post,* December 4, 1974. May 15, 2018.
[33] National Security Archive, No.18970 July 2001, http://www.gwu.edu/nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB180/index2.htm.
[34] Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Dirección Federal de Seguridad, 100-10-16-4, leg. 5, h. 315., "Estado de Guerrero, Grupo Guerrillero de Lucio Cabañas Barrientos, Denominado 'Partido de los Pobres,'" 25 August 1972, https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:330775.

Conclusion

Guerrero's noncombatants may not have taken up arms in the struggle, but they were by no means passive during the unorthodox war between the Mexican government and the insurgencies composed of poor Guerrerense campesinos. The Dirty War remains an understudied topic in Mexico as many Mexicans still fail to realize the PRI's use of state terror, and the continued dangers whose origins are based in the 1960s. In 2011, Lucio Cabañas' wife Isabel Nava (a noncombatant), was assassinated leaving church after returning from exile in Minnesota. Guerrero no longer hosts the PDLP and ACNR guerrilla movements, but is still the home to students, workers, and rural people who continuously demand change in their corrupted state. These actors are important to any Guerrero narrative when considering why this state has hosted so many Mexican rebels. Guerrero's history of noncombatant action projects how these distinct guerrilla organizations received power and authority. Students and unionized workers provided a link and platform in areas the Mexican government highly monitored and did so to enlighten others of armed insurgent threat in Guerrero. Rural communities were not hiding spots like state reports labeled them to be but were in fact clandestine bases that protected them from the federal invaders, who everyone recognized as the PRI. The history of bloodshed in Guerrero, combined with the media's current portrayal of the violence in the state today, could lead one to feeling hopeless. Although this is an unfortunate truth at times, Guerrero's history of student, worker, and campesino activism that remains energetic today, sparks hope for a new Guerrero that may come one day.