Problems in Modern Latin American History

And this doesn’t mean that there were no Sandinistas there. There certainly were, and that is precisely why Camilo Ortega went to Monimbó, with contacts we had there, to try to lead the uprising, and he was killed in the fighting.

M. Harnecker: I understand now. Therefore, it was not an uprising that you had planned. Now then, would you have stopped it if you had been able to do so?

H. Ortega: It would have been very difficult to do that, because the uprising responded to the objective development of the community. Of course, in keeping with our plans, maybe we would have postponed it or planned it differently. Maybe we wouldn’t have organized an armed insurrection but rather some other kind of mass activity, but that’s the way things turned out. This was the way this Indian sector responded immediately to the incentive provided by the capture of the cities by the FSLN several days before.

In late February the organization of the vanguard was still limited and we didn’t have the cadres to channel the determination and fighting spirit that existed among the masses.

M. Harnecker: An isolated uprising like that one meant that the enemy could concentrate all its forces against it?

H. Ortega: Exactly, and that’s something we learned by experience.

M. Harnecker: Then it’s important to know about other historical experiences in order to avoid making mistakes?

H. Ortega: Of course. We, the vanguard, knew of those historical experiences, but the masses didn’t.

M. Harnecker: So it was actually a lesson for the people?

H. Ortega: Yes. We, the vanguard, knew it from the classics. The principle of concentration of forces has been one of the basic principles in warfare since ancient times.

What’s important is that, in our case, we went through that experience in spite of the vanguard. The vanguard was certain that the uprising would be a setback, but a setback that would be transitory, because the decision of Monimbó contributed to raising the morale of the rest of the people who joined the uprising.

To what extent can the action be considered to have been a historical mistake? To what extent was the action an error on the part of the people, or was it simply their only option at that time? The fact remains that that example contributed both nationally and internationally to the development and ultimate triumph of the insurrection. Perhaps without the painful step which entailed great sacrifice it would have been more difficult to achieve that moral authority, that arousal among the country’s masses, that spirit of support for one another that came from having witnessed how they had sacrificed themselves to win the support of the whole world for a people that were waging a struggle singlehanded. Perhaps without that example it would have been more difficult to speed up the conditions for the uprising.

That was an experience we and the people learned from.

With the experience we had acquired from October to Monimbó we were able to verify that the masses were willing to stage an uprising, but they needed more military organization, more mass organization. There was a need for riper political conditions and there was a need for more agitation, for better means of propaganda, such as a clandestine radio station.

It was necessary to mobilize the masses for war through the most elementary forms of organization.

M. Harnecker: You began to consider the matter of the radio station then?

H. Ortega: We’d been thinking about it since October but we hadn’t been able to set it up. We had a radio set that the first anti-Somoza fighters had used in 1960, but it was old and we weren’t able to put it in working order at that time.

However, we managed to fix it later and we put it in operation in those months of 1978. It was heard in Rivas, but very faintly. By then we were fully aware of the need for a radio station, of a way to communicate with the masses in order to prepare them for the insurrection.

But to get back to the idea I was developing. A gradual strengthening of forces was achieved amidst an enormous amount of activity that included the execution of Gen. Regualdo Pérez Vega, chief of the general staff of the National Guard, the capture of the palace in August, and winding up the first stage of this insurrectional movement that had begun in October 1977, with the nationwide uprising in September 1978.

7. Testimony of a Rural Worker from the Quiché Region in Guatemala • María Lupe

María Lupe joined the revolutionary Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), founded in 1972, early in the history of this movement. The EGP recruited supporters among landless peasants and squatters, and it has been particularly strong in Guatemala’s northern department of El Quiché. María recounts her experiences as a rural worker, activist, and combatant.

Before, my husband and I were very poor. We worked for the rich on a plantation. I took care of the young people; I cooked and cleaned from one in the morning until ten o’clock at night. Since there was no electricity everything was done manually. My husband earned $0.50 per day, and I was paid in meals only. Later, we bought a house and a little bit of land, but things became very bad for us and we were always in debt.

About twelve years ago we decided to go and see what we could find in the north, in Ixcan, but there it was even harder for us. There was nothing there, the store was four days from the road. We spent four months eating only atole [a drink made from corn] and tortillas. One of the local children died of malnutrition. I was pregnant with my third daughter, and I was very pale and undernourished. She was born in the seventh month, very thin, and I almost lost her. Later the engineers came and they gave us a little plot of land. During that time many people arrived and things improved a little. The people that came were from all over the country, from the coast, from the mountains, from all over.

After two years the first members of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor arrived. I remember just when it was because there wasn’t even any corn at that time. I was scared, because I didn’t know any better, and because all I had been told by the government was that the guerrillas only came to rob and to rape our daughters. Even one of my kids was scared, one who is now a guerrilla himself, and he ran and hid the radio.

The compañeros helped everyone to build a house, and it was the first time that we had worked collectively. Later, they explained to us that they were poor too and that they were fighting so that the poor could live a better life and that we were going to win. How are they going to win, I thought, when the towns are all so far apart? But now I see how the struggle has developed all over the country.

We were one of the first families that began to collaborate. I liked to raise chickens and pigs and I sold them at a good price to the compañeros and also gave some to them. Later, we gave them information and bought things for them that they needed. Others took advantage of them; they sold them things at very high prices, but when they realized what the compañeros were doing, that their purpose for being there was to help us and themselves, then these people stopped taking advantage and began to collaborate also.

All the families collaborated although there were times when we could only speak to the woman or only to the man in a family, and then later the one would try to convince the other; but sometimes they could not agree. Many times the men who were participating did not want their women working with the other men in the group, because of jealousy. So we arranged it so that other women worked with them instead. The women organized the preparation and serving of [food]; they brought it to my house, and then we would take it to the mountains where the compañeros were training.

After a year spies began to appear, and later the army placed a military commissioner there. There was a lack of secrecy, so everyone knew about those of us who were collaborating, especially those first families. My husband and eldest daughter, twelve years old, went to train in the mountains, and there my daughter learned to read and write. They stayed there three months and then they returned. But after a month they had to return to the mountains for good because the army was pursuing them. At the time Luis Arenas was executed, a very repressive landowner who was called the “Tiger of Ixcan.” This was made public by the organization and then the repression really began.

I continued alone with my six children. I said that I could not work on the plantation, but later they had me doing everything. Since I was aware, I continued collaborating. Information and food were collected from people in the entire area. It was a rare individual who did not know of the compañeros. Since people live far from one another, we began to support one another, working collectively among twenty families or so, forming a network.

Those of us who were organized were given classes, the women and the men separately. A compañera spoke to us about the discrimination against women, about why we had not been able to mix and work with the men, about the lack of trust they had in us. We knew about discrimination within a marriage, apart from the exploitation by the rich; husbands who say we can only be in the home, that we can’t do certain things, and generally women, not being conscious of anything else or of any other way of life, believed this to be natural.

The first element we dealt with in our meetings was the problem of women being hit by their husbands. It was very hard to change this custom. At the same time as we were discussing it, the compañeros were explaining to the men how a woman is not a slave and that she should not be beaten. But to stop this practice is very difficult and in some cases impossible. It was also necessary to fight for a woman’s right to participate in political work. There were times when she would have to go out at night, for example, and her husband would not want her to leave. Later, they understood that it was because of lack of trust in the relationship that he would not allow her to go out. My husband and I never had problems like this.

Other customs were even harder to change. For example, among landowners like ourselves, we marry at fifteen years of age and older, but we marry freely. But amongst the Indian population it is different. Some Indian people who lived close by came and offered to buy my twelve-year-old daughter. It was their custom that if this is what our daughter wanted, then it was okay, but if not, then no. They accused us of discriminating
against them because they were Indians. We spoke about this with the compañeros of the organization, and they spoke with the Indians later, but one cannot simply change the customs of a people so easily. Finally, the Indian man bought another young woman, an Indian woman. They remained hostile towards us. Later, the young man became a guerrilla, and our two families worked together, but it is very hard to change these customs. It is even harder for the Indian woman than it is for the Indian, because of the hard life she leads. Sometimes when the compañeros of the organization come to their homes, the women hide. They are very timid and since the compañeros do not speak their dialect, they cannot communicate with them.

I was the first compañera to arm herself, because I was pursued by the army; they came to take me away. I left the children with another woman, but she really couldn’t care for them well. I had to come down from the mountains into the town, where the army knew me and was looking for me, and take my children away with me. We did this like a military operation, and we went back to the mountains with the children. We lived several months like that, in the encampment, and sometimes I was there alone with the children.

Later, because of security precautions, I left the encampment and went to live in another town. Then I lost contact with the organization. I had very little money and no one from the organization made contact with me. So, with the children, I worked washing other people’s clothes and selling tortillas. My oldest daughter worked as a babysitter to make some money. How we survived I don’t know. We lived that way for five months, with me telling everyone that my husband had left us, that he was a wretched man, and they believed me.

Already in the encampment they were doing everything: training, studying, going out to the towns and speaking with the people, making necessary purchases, etc. If the men went into the towns alone, the people did not trust them, but if the women also went they saw that there were women participating, women carrying arms, women equal to the men.

We gave talks to the people in the towns about simple things, comparing the growth of the organization to the growth of the corn. The women in the organization gave talks to the women, and the men to the men.