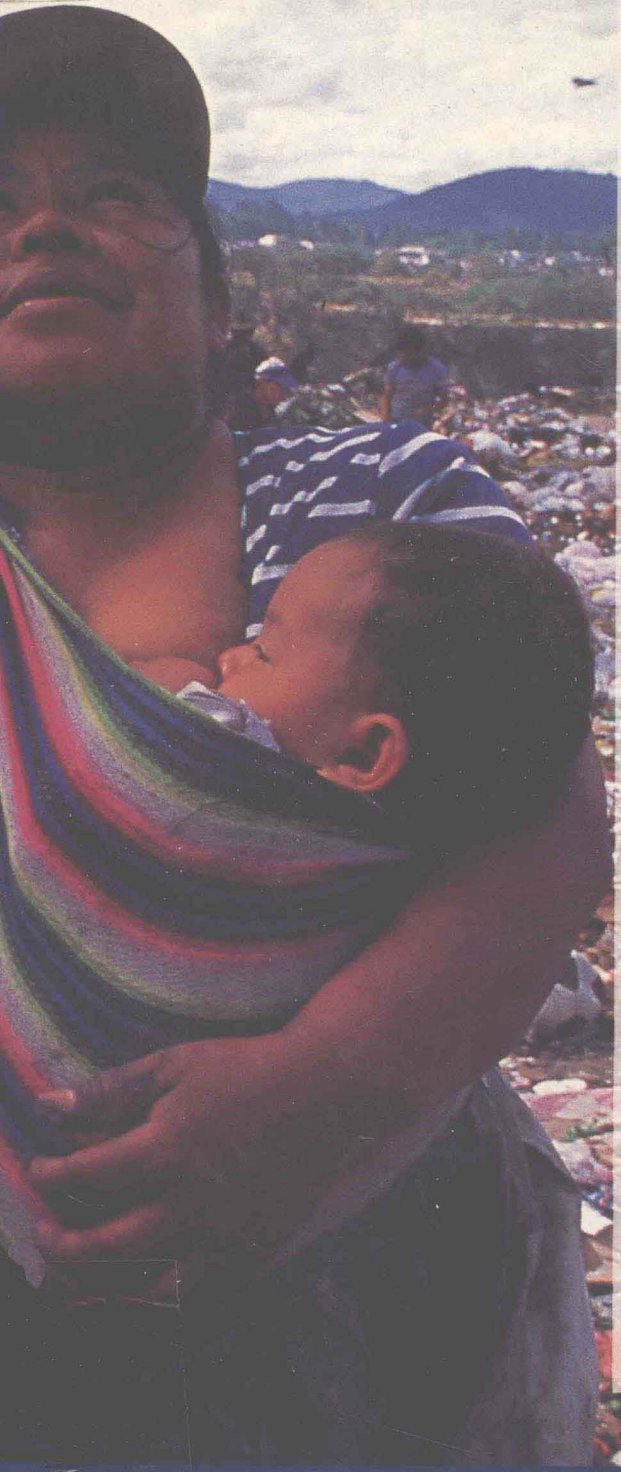

THE SKY NEVER CHANGES

Testimonies from the Guatemalan Labor Movement

Omas F. Reed and Karen Brandow

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and
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To all union organizers in Guatemala, and their fallen *compañeros*, whose histories are inscribed on the soul of the Guatemalan working class.

T.R.

To the courageous and warm people of Guatemala's popular movement, who, despite my country's destructive history in theirs, took me into their family and shared laughter, sorrows, and confidences. Here is another "grain of sand" for our fight.

K.B.

Soft Evidence

Ariel Dorfman

If he were dead
I'd know it.
Don't ask me how.
I'd know.

I have no proof,
no clues, no answer,
nothing that proves
or disproves.
        There's the sky,
        the same blue
        it always was.
But that's no proof.
Atrocities go on
and the sky never changes.
        There are the children.
        They're finished playing.
        Now they'll start to drink
        like a herd of wild
        horses.
        Tonight they'll be asleep
        as soon as their heads
        touch the pillow.
But who would accept that
as proof
that their father
is not dead?
The madness goes on
and children are always children.
        Well, there's a bird
        —the kind that stops
        in mid-flight
        just wings in the air
        and almost no body—

and it comes every day
at the same time
to the same flower
just like before.
That doesn't prove anything either.
Everything's the same as it was the day they took him
away

as if nothing had happened
and we were just waiting
for him to come home from work.
No sign, no clue,
nothing that proves
or disproves.

But if he were dead
I'd know it.
It's as simple as that,
don't ask me how.
If you were not alive
I'd know it.

Preface

This book is a collection of ten oral histories from individuals who have been actively involved in, or deeply affected by, the struggle for labor rights in Guatemala. The chapters include testimonies from rank-and-file activists, labor organizers, union leaders, widows of assassinated/disappeared unionists, and peasant labor organizers. The stories of women and men, adults and a child, veterans of the struggle and more recent recruits, willing participants and inadvertent victims of a family member's participation in the labor movement are all included in these pages. Through these testimonies, we learn of a people's struggle to organize unions in defense of their rights, the tremendous personal costs borne by them as a result of the struggle, and their hopes for a just society free of repression.

Since the 1950s, when a democratically elected president was overthrown with the complicity of the United States government, the struggle for labor rights in Guatemala has been a hazardous endeavor. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have produced numerous well-documented accounts of serious and systematic human rights abuses against labor organizers, rank-and-file activists, and union leaders. Our goal in this book is to put a human face on these accounts by providing a forum for Guatemalans to relate their stories to us, in their own words.

Readers of these oral testimonies will note both the bravery and the pain expressed by the storytellers. The reader will also note, however, the role of the labor movement in Guatemala within the broader popular struggle for human rights and democracy. Labor rights cannot exist in the absence of institutions that provide a people the opportunity to voice their goals, dreams, and aspirations in a democratic and nonviolent way. The labor movement in Guatemala, as expressed by the participants in this project, views its struggle as part of a larger battle for human rights and democracy, and each participant in this project has espoused a nonviolent approach to the struggle.

Some of the participants have requested anonymity, and they are identified by a single name (e.g., Angel); others wish to be publicly identified, and their names appear in full (e.g., Rodolfo Robles). Whether they have shared anonymously or publicly, all have put themselves at risk of reprisal or assassination by telling us their stories.

We thank the following people and organizations for their help with and support for this project:

Frances Benson, director of the ILR Press and editor-in-chief of Cornell University Press, who believed in this project and guided the editorial process with great skill and patience.

Ariel Dorfman, for graciously allowing us to reproduce his poem "Soft Evidence" and use a phrase from it as the title of this book.

The reviewers, who offered much helpful advice and encouragement.

Gladys Creelman, who transcribed the Spanish tapes.

Lois Brandow, who helped with editing, and, over an eight-year period, supported her daughter Karen's involvement in human rights work in Guatemala.

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Burton Weisbrod and the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University, who provided time and space

for Tom Reed to work on the project while he was a visiting scholar there from 1992 through 1993.

The Master of Arts in Industrial Relations Program at Wayne State University, which provided important financial support at the final stages of the project.

And, most of all, the participants in this project, for sharing their histories with us.

T. F. R.

Detroit and Killaloe, Co. Clare, Ireland

K. B.

Washington, D.C.

Chronology of Events

April 1976 The CNUS (Comité Nacional de Unidad Sindical/National Committee of Trade Union Unity) is formed.

April 15, 1978 The CUC (Comité de Unidad Campesina/Committee of Peasant Unity) comes to public light.

May 29, 1978 The Panzos massacre occurs in the department of Alta Verapaz in which one hundred Kekchi Indians are killed by the Guatemalan military.

July 1, 1978 General Fernando Romeo Lucas García becomes president of Guatemala and heads up four years of widespread terror and repression.

January 31, 1980 Thirty-nine people are burned to death when the Guatemalan police set fire to the Spanish Embassy, which peasant and student leaders had peacefully taken over to denounce repression in the countryside.

May 1, 1980 Dozens of participants in the Workers' Day march are disappeared and killed.

June 21, 1980 Twenty-seven union leaders are kidnapped and disappeared from the offices of the CNT (Central Nacional de Trabajadores/National Workers' Central).

August 24, 1980 Seventeen unionists are disappeared from a labor education course held at Emaus, a town in the department of Escuintla.

March 23, 1982 General Efraín Ríos Montt becomes president of Guatemala after a military coup.

August 8, 1983 General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores overthrows Ríos Montt and becomes president.

February 1984 to March 1985 Hundreds of unionists occupy the Coca-Cola bottling plant to protest the illegal plant closing; they win.

June 1984 GAM (Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo/Mutual Support Group for Families of the Disappeared) is founded.

February 1985 UNSITRAGUA (Unidad Sindical de Trabajadores de Guatemala/Unity of Guatemalan Workers) is founded as a result of organizing meetings held in the occupied Coca-Cola bottling plant.

January 14, 1986 Vinicio Cerezo, the first civilian president of Guatemala in twenty years, takes power.

June 1986 UITA (Unión Internacional de Trabajadores de Alimentos y Similares), the Guatemalan office of the IUF, the International Union of Food and Allied Workers, opens.

June 1987 to August 1988 Workers of the Lunafil thread factory occupy the plant to protest obligatory twelve-hour workshifts; they win.

November 1987 The union of workers of the Accumuladores Victor car-battery factory is legally recognized. Eleven days later the plant is illegally closed by its owners.

December 1987 The UASP (Unidad de Acción Sindical y Popular/Unity of Labor and Popular Action) is formed.

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Members of GAM at Army Day demonstration, 1987. Photo O. Lucas

Contents

Introduction

No battle is ever permanently won, just as there are no permanent defeats. In Guatemala, and elsewhere in the world, we can take nothing for granted. There will be other, more difficult battles. Let us, therefore, always keep in mind what it takes to win.

It takes unity, courage, and staying power on the front line: If the Guatemalan workers had not stood fast, international support would have been to no avail. It takes coalition building: church groups, human rights organizations, public interest and solidarity groups, as well as other unions, were our most valuable allies. It takes money, lots of it, and the ability to raise it quickly. It takes organization: without a permanent, established, tried and true proven network of solidarity and action, local struggles will be crushed and wasted. Finally, it takes internationalism: the clear understanding that the battle of one union, however small and remote from one's country, makes a difference to all workers wherever they are.

—DAN GALIN, General Secretary of the International Union of Foodworkers, commenting on the historic victory of the Guatemalan Coca-Cola Bottlers' Union in 1985

That a labor and peasant movement exists at all in Guatemala is a testimony to the persistence and bravery of the workers in that country. Their capacity to survive continuous waves of repression, both physically and emotionally, is

an example for workers and other oppressed groups throughout the world.

When Guatemalans are asked to talk about their history, some begin with the flourishing Mayan civilizations of centuries ago, others with the Spanish conquest beginning in 1492, while others see the CIA-organized coup in 1954 as the turning point in creating today's Guatemala. Workers' and peasant movements have experienced a series of growth periods, followed by intense periods of repression.

Modern labor history could begin around the decade of the 1920s. The first guilds and unions were formed then, among craftspeople and railroad, banana, and port workers. A national Department of Labor was created in 1925, but restrictions were placed on striking workers. After the Russian Revolution, workers were influenced to some degree by communist ideology.

Unions came under attack during the fourteen-year presidency of General Jorge Ubico, from 1930 to 1944. During that time, the words "union," "worker," "strike," and "labor rights" were outlawed from everyday vocabulary. People who used them were considered communists and were subject to severe punishment; many were jailed.

Unionism peaked during the "ten years of Guatemalan spring," 1944–54, after General Ubico was overthrown in a nonviolent uprising. The many gains won during those years included an eight-hour workday, minimum wages, regulation of child and women's labor, paid vacations, the right to organize, collective bargaining and strike power, labor courts for settling disputes, and a national social security system. The first Labor Code was instituted in 1947, and rights were extended to rural and public workers. During this period, more than five hundred unions were registered with the government, representing over 10 percent of the work force—a figure that exceeds the number of active unions today.

When President Arbenz began agrarian reform and expropriated idle land belonging to the United Fruit Company (U.S.), offering to pay the company the $1.2 million they claimed on their income tax forms that the land was worth, United Fruit demanded $16 million and began to call Arbenz a communist sympathizer. In June 1954 the CIA led a small army of "liberation forces" into Guatemala. Arbenz resigned and Colonel Carlos Castillas Armas