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An Information Brigade Activist Remembers '68

There are hundreds of stories of what happened to the brigade members, so I will just relate my experience in the movement and the terrible night of October 2.

It's August 14, 1968 and some *compañeros* and I had been out of the country for three weeks in that crucial year. We had gone to the ninth World Festival of Youth and Students in Sofia, Bulgaria. We had a layover in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, reversing Christopher Columbus's route. From there we went to Madrid, in a country in the full throes of Franco's rule. Then we went to Vienna, where we took a train to Sofia, along with the Czechoslovak delegation, all young people. There were workers, professionals, students, leaders of the Communist youth groups, among many others, full of hope, joy, and the euphoria produced by the course of what was then called "socialism with a human face" that they were all part of.

When we crossed the border, the Hungarian police tried to stop the train and demand that all the slogans on the

walls of the cars be erased: "democratic socialism," *svoboda* ("freedom" in Czech), and others like them. It was very exciting to journey together with the Czechs through Hungary and part of Rumania, and finally arrive in Bulgaria.

As We Crossed the Danube, Mexico Set Out on a Freedom Road

The day after our flight left for Europe, on July 26, the clashes between students and riot police began with a demonstration in the Juárez Semicircle in the Alameda Park. The young people at a rally supporting the Cuban Revolution were savagely repressed.

Around the site of the rally, the trash cans had mysteriously been filled with rocks, and unidentified individuals began throwing them against the storefronts on Juárez Avenue. Jewelry stores, candy stores, souvenir shops, and all manner of other businesses were targeted by these attacks. Meanwhile, the students tried to move on to the central Zócalo Square along Madero Street, but when they got to Palma Street, they were brutally attacked by the police.

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Simultaneously, adjacent streets saw clashes and persecutions of students and students taking refuge in their schools. All the downtown high schools were turned into barricades; the young people parked trucks across the entrances and then set them on fire with Molotov cocktails to defend themselves from the police. They managed to resist from July 26 to July 29, but on July 30 in the early hours, the army arrived and destroyed the century-old door of the Justo Sierra installations with a bazooka. This sparked enormous anger among university students and authorities both; university Rector Javier Barros Sierra lowered the flag to half-mast and called for a march against repression for August 1.

The Freedom Spring Was Beginning

Without that call from the university rector, the massacre might have happened before, on August 2. His participation was fundamental, a huge umbrella that protected the students from the repressive ire of the state.

That ire was headed by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and all his officials, mainly Minister of the Interior Luis Echeverría Álvarez, Mexico City Mayor Alfonso Corona del Rosal, and Minister of Defense Marcelino García Barragán.

The entire structure of the state, the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate, the printed press, radio, television, the chambers of commerce and industry, the bureaucratized, officialist, corrupt unions, and the *de facto* powers combatted the students by supporting government repression, including the acts that led to the massacre of defenseless students.

As this was happening in Mexico's capital, in Sofia, we were attending all the festival activities denouncing the violence against the Mexican students. This made us the first international brigade. That's when I found out things that had seemed impossible to me. The European youth called for a demonstration in front of the U.S. embassy in Sofia. What surprised me was that the police of the supposedly socialist state repressed the demonstration, using similar tools to those used by their Mexican counterparts: clubs, tear gas, etc., to disperse people who



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were condemning the U.S. invasion of Vietnam and supporting the Vietcong.

The festival was an immense, intense experience. I met delegates from Al Fatah, headed by Yasser Arafat, who were staying in the same building as the Mexican delegation in a kind of Olympic village. Arafat got up at 5 a.m. every morning to head the Palestinian delegation in military exercises around the buildings. Among them were very attractive women who had half their faces covered with a hijab and others who covered their entire bodies with burkas.

Noi siamo the Generation of Heroic Vietnam

To go back to the demonstration in front of the embassy, I remember that an Italian speaker spoke in his own language, saying, “We are the generation of heroic Vietnam, and we were sailing with fair winds. Our ship was driven forward by the libertarian winds of independence of the countries of Africa, by the struggles in Southeast Asia, and the libertarian hurricane of ‘the bearded ones’” (Fidel Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos, Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, and Che Guevara, who a few years before had taken power in Cuba).

The worldwide student movement that had begun in May that year in Paris spread to almost 64 countries: not only the capitalist countries of Western Europe and the Mediterranean, but also the socialist countries, where they came out against authoritarianism. Naturally, it also came alive in the so-called Third World countries: North Africa, what was called “Black Africa,” Asia, and, of course, Latin America, especially in Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico.

Just three days after returning home, on August 18, Czechoslovakia was invaded by Warsaw Pact troops. This crime against the democratic process in that nation was one of the most severe blows against a generation that

had had great hopes in Soviet socialism. It was even worse when Fidel Castro supported the Moscow-led intervention.

Return to Mexico

The night of August 14, several dozen *compañeros*, UNAM students, especially from the School of Economics, met us at the airport; they had taken over a bus to go there. The idea was to go together in a group and that way avoid the possible detention of those of us who were returning from Bulgaria. When we got through immigration and exited the last door of the airport, my father was waiting for me; I gave him my suitcase and didn’t see him again until after October 2.

That same night, we arrived at the School of Economics and participated in several brigade and committees for struggle meetings. The next day at a meeting of the UNAM Coordinating Committee, we heard that the University Council had approved the National Strike Council’s demands, except the one about freeing the non-university political prisoners, but that Gilberto Guevara had proposed that the University Council take charge of the list of demands. We opposed this and managed to defeat it. We were against it because, although it was important that the University Council had taken on board the main demands on the list, we couldn’t allow that the condition for doing so be not defending the freedom of the non-university political prisoners, like social activists Valentín Campa and Demetrio Vallejo. Accepting that would have meant negating the document’s independent character.

From that night until September 18, I remained in University City, doing guard duty, participating in the assemblies, discussing in meetings of the university Communist Youth, going out with my brigade everywhere: to unions, to markets, to the street, to collect food and money. We discussed the whole time, dialoguing with our *compañeros*, especially with Miguel Eduardo (The Owl) Valle, the National Strike Council delegate from the School of Economics and representative of the Communist Youth.

Brigade Member in Europe and in Mexico

I was a brigade member both in Europe and in Mexico for the great freedom movement of ’68, and as such, I enjoyed

freedom like any other rebellious youth. As The Owl said in his speech in the Zócalo Central Square, “You don’t forget freedom.” That is my most important memory from those days: the joy of going through the streets shouting our slogans, finding support in many places, the solidarity of the public, like the three instances I will describe here.

One time we went on a brigade to the borough of Coyoacán and decided to go to a paper factory near the Conchita Plaza to ask them to donate material for flyers and documents. We went to the manager’s office and were received by a Spanish man who, to my surprise, gave us huge rolls of paper that each weighed more than a ton.

Another day, we held a rally at the door where the workers left the Mexican Light Company, located at the corner of Melchor Ocampo Avenue and Marina Nacional Boulevard; we went in a bus from the National School of Economics. Standing on the roof, I used a megaphone to speak to the workers, inviting them to go to the demonstration on September 13. What surprised me was that on that day, at the esplanade in front of the Anthropology Museum there were more than 400 electricity workers with banners and placards ready and willing to march with us.

Another time, Miguel Eduardo (The Owl) Valle and I were on our way to University City in my family’s old ’49 Ford. In the Hongos Roundabout, I committed a traffic violation by passing another car incorrectly, and the patrol car pulled us over. The Owl daringly faced them, saying, “We’re in a hurry because we’re going to a meeting of the National Strike Council in University City.” I thought this was stupid and that they’d arrest us. To my surprise, when they found out we were students and were on our way to the CNH, the patrol car escorted us a long part of the way there.

We brigade members had dozens —thousands— of experiences like that one during the whole movement.

The Vicissitudes of ’68 Continue There and Here

I had followed the French May ’68 movement. The immense demonstrations and the eight-million-worker-strong strike had not been able to bring the government down. General Charles de Gaulle called for a referendum and won it.

In Czechoslovakia, Dubcek was defeated. The troops smashed socialism with a human face. Not even a state

supported by society, that is, workers, university communities, women, and young people, with international public opinion on its side, could defeat Soviet power. Perhaps that’s why, even though I was profoundly enthusiastic —euphoric even— like thousands of students, I was also aware that it was practically impossible to defeat the government.

After the immense September 13 march, four weeks before the Olympic Games were to begin, the movement entered a dead-end street. If dialogue did not begin with the government, it was almost inevitable that it would use all its repressive capabilities and have the army crush us.

Most of the students and their leaders thought it was impossible for the army to act against them. They also naively believed that the soldiers were “the people in uniform,” who would not fire on them. This was the movement and its leadership’s biggest mistake.

We Should Have Understood and Responded Yes to the University Rector’s Call to Halt the Strike

It was inconceivable that anyone would say yes to stopping the strike: you would have been labeled a traitor immediately. We discussed intensely and heatedly in the Communist Youth meetings, but we didn’t dare take the proposal of stopping the strike to the school assemblies. The government was increasingly aggressive, more and more intransigent: it machine gunned the schools and arrested brigade members. Its newspapers slandered us, accusing us of being part of a communist conspiracy.

On the night of September 18, the army mounted a huge operation to take over University City. They calculated that they would be able to arrest all the CNH leaders there, dealing the movement a death blow. They were wrong. Minutes later, thousands of leaflets were in circu-

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lation denouncing the government. It was clearer and clearer that the state would try to stop the movement at any cost.

During the military occupation, the days were extremely tense. Thousands of activists were living clandestinely. All over the city, brigade members were running their mimeograph machines day and night, printing thousands of leaflets. Students defended their schools everywhere by lighting trucks and patrol cars on fire with Molotov cocktails. Mexico City's Federal District and a few other cities in the rest of the country experienced an authentic student rebellion. Those September days witnessed the military occupation of the UNAM, but other schools like the IPN nurtured an immense wave of rebellion and student subversion.

'68 Was Not an Institutional Movement Of Young People with Their Constitution Under Their Arms

If there had been a leadership, a party, a group that had called for an armed rebellion, perhaps there would have been clashes both in the capital and the rest of the country. That didn't happen. The students were respected by the population, but they were also feared.

The government propaganda was winning the battle, to the point that many people thought it was the right time to put an end to the students' "excesses" that endangered the peace of society. They demanded the government act "firmly."

On guard duty at night, we discussed everything: the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, the stagnation of the Soviet Union, peaceful coexistence, feminism, the struggle of blacks in the United States, the university reform of the UNAM and all the other Mexican universities. We also talked about what the socialist revolution would be like in Mexico; what would our contribution to it be, and how would we make it?

We thought that after the student strikes would come strikes of men and women workers, and then uprisings all over the country. Others simply talked about how the movement's six demands would be resolved. We also talked a lot about the invasion of Czechoslovakia. I remember that in the August 18 joint teacher-student assembly, Professor Ángel Bassols, the son of the great Narciso Ba-

ssols, interrupted the discussion because the Warsaw Pact had just invaded Czechoslovakia. He said that this had changed everything. And he was right. It changed absolutely everything in Mexico's '68 movement, but also everything on the world stage.

The French Said, "Question, Discuss, Criticize, Challenge"

"Contestation" is the slogan of France's May '68 events. We debated (*on contestait*) the way forward for the movement, how to create worker-student unity, what to do to break the wall of the kind of union corruption known in Mexico as *charrismo* that was keeping us from penetrating the workers' movement. The most radical among us proposed going beyond the six demands and including wage demands so the workers would join us, just as journalist Víctor Rico Galán proposed from Lecumberri Prison. Nothing was sacred; everything was discussed; everything was challenged; everything was doubted; everything was questioned. But that wasn't all: in the brigades, in the assemblies, everywhere, above all people acted.

If the shock troops organized by the authorities in the educational institutions themselves —the famous *porros*— were breaking the strike in High School No. 2, we would take a bus from the University City and go directly to Licenciado Verdad and Guatemala Streets, near the school, and confront them there. We managed to chase them away and they failed in their attempt to take back our schools thanks to the response by brigade members and leaders like The Owl.

When the army took over University City, brigades came from out of nowhere to throw Molotov cocktails at trucks, patrol cars, and streetcars, and once those were in flames, they were used as barricades to defend the

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schools. For some members of the movement, these actions were the beginning of a general rebellion that would be replicated in cities all over the country.

A Hail of Bullets

On the morning of October 2, we heard that there would be a meeting between the government’s recently appointed negotiators, Jorge de la Vega and Andrés Caso, with representatives of the CNH. Both that meeting and the fact that the army had left the UNAM on September 30 made me think that the government’s “hawks” had been defeated and the “doves” had won the day.

When we left my parents’ house in the Popotla Neighborhood for Tlatelolco, we were somewhat optimistic. I was with my brother Carlos, a normal school teacher and UNAM architectural student, in his Fiat, accompanied by my other brother, César, also a normal school teacher and student of physics and mathematics at the IPN. We headed to Tlatelolco on Los Gallos Avenue, and then turned onto Manuel González Street. There, we ran directly into dozens of army trucks in an enormous line that went from Insurgentes Avenue to Reforma Avenue, that is, they took up all the space behind the Tlatelolco Housing Project. It scared us.

When we got to the Three Cultures Plaza, I headed to the ground floor of the Chihuahua Building, where the sound system for the CNH speakers was to be set up. I told the *compañeros* that we were practically surrounded by the army and that the demonstration should be canceled to avoid being repressed. They told me that they had decided to only hold the rally and to cancel the march programmed to the Casco de Santo Tomás area. I thought that was the most prudent course of action.

We were very concerned that there were men with shaved heads (like soldiers) stationed at the entrances of the elevators in the Chihuahua Building. This was an

indication that they might try to arrest the *compañeros* from the CNH.

Some of my *compañeros* from the National School of Economics Communist Youth were exactly on the ground floor of the Chihuahua Building, a few meters away from the elevators. Among others, I remember Miguel Ángel Salvoch, Enrique del Val, Bonfilio Cervantes Tavera, Alfonso Vadillo, and “Nachito.” Alfonso and “Nachito” left a little before the rally to go on a brigada to Xochimilco. The Owl was on the stage because he was going to be one of the speakers.

When the rally was ending, we saw the soldiers coming across the San Juan de Letrán Avenue bridge. They advanced with their rifles in hand along a narrow path between Vocational School 7, the project’s apartment buildings, and the area with the pre-Hispanic ruins. As he saw them approaching, the person with the microphone called for calm, naively urging that nobody “accept provocations.”

A lot of people began to panic, but they ran precisely in the direction of the soldiers. Miguel Ángel Salvoch created a human chain but, I managed to get away, and without thinking much about it, I headed east toward Reforma Avenue, running on the paths through the buildings. There were several of us, among them my brothers, and a cousin who was at his first demonstration.

We got as far as Reforma Avenue, just when a convoy of military jeeps closed off the circle around the demo.

We crossed the avenue under a hail of bullets from the helicopter. For a few moments we stopped to make a decision: we could return to the housing project and try to take refuge in one of the buildings, risking being arrested when they combed the area; we could get on a bus if the driver would stop; or we could cross Reforma under the hail of bullets from the helicopter. We decided on the last option, and on the way, I saw several people fall, without knowing if they had been injured or were dead. There was no time to stop to see what was going on.

Miraculously, we got across.

In the slums bordering on the recently opened avenue, people took us in, and we stayed 30 or 45 minutes. We could hear the shooting everywhere. The soldiers patrolled the streets looking for students. People protected us in their little dwellings and offered us coffee and bread “to counteract the fright.” When they realized there were no more soldiers they said, “Go on, and run as fast as you can.”

Near the Peralvillo Neighborhood, we managed to take a taxi and leave the area. Miguel Ángel Salvoch, Enrique del Val, and Bonfilio really went through hell. Salvoch was hit by a bullet through and through on his scalp, and he was bleeding: his whole face was covered in blood. Del Val and Bonfilio managed to get him into a military ambulance, but when he arrived at the Military Hospital, the officers shouted, “What is that scumbag doing here? Take him back to Tlatelolco!” Anguished, Del Val and Bonfilio managed to put him in a Red Cross ambulance. When he got to the hospital, the agents from the Ministry of the Interior wanted to arrest him. Fortunately, his wound was superficial and they were able to stop the bleeding with a bandage. Miguel Ángel Salvoch was freed a few days later.

After the Massacre

After the events of October 2 at the Tlatelolco Plaza, unfortunately the movement retreated. The next day at University City only a few dozen brigade members showed up and it was practically impossible to hold an assembly. Any repression weakens a movement, and therefore, the discussion became more and more bitter in the search for who was at fault for our prostration. Terrible signs of division appeared, slander, berating the leadership, and specifically those who had survived and continued the struggle outside of jail.

Those were very sad, bitter days. The few members of the Communist Youth who were not in jail and continued in the movement were accused of betrayal, of selling out the movement for a handful of congressional seats.

The climate was one of terror: we were under attack from the government, but also accused by the groups manipulated by the so-called “sacred cows” who were in jail. They were the ones that accused the *pescados* (members of the Communist Party) of being traitors.

Some of those prisoners used their relatives, even their mothers, to go to the houses of the members of the Communist Youth to pressure them to break with the organization and with the “bureaucrats,” the leaders of the Communist Youth and the Communist Party. Some beloved *compañeros*, brothers in struggle for many years, like Eduardo (The Owl) Valle, were subjected to this kind of manipulation and resigned from the Communist

Youth. It was a heavy blow to live through all that internal warfare based on false accusations and even physical attacks.

Sometimes, when we visited the *compañeros* in jail at Lecumberri, we had to stoically put up with their insults, despite having gone there to express our solidarity, our support, and risking our own freedom just by going there. They didn’t care; they thought they had the absolute truth on their side and, therefore, they were willing to do whatever was necessary to maintain control of the movement, even if it meant using slander and insults.

Nevertheless, there were reasons for questioning and even challenging the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), particularly because its European counterparts, among them the French and others, came out against the movements in their countries; in France, for example, they used workers to physically attack student activists.

We all remembered an absurd—even imbecilic—statement made by the PCM leadership at the start of the movement, when President Díaz Ordaz said he was offering to *extend his hand* to find a way out. The party responded that it was willing to take him at his word and also offer its *hand* to the same end. This discredited us in the student movement. The pressure from the UNAM Communist Youth activists made the Central Committee take a step back on this position, and we were able to reverse this “extended hand” policy. However, there was still a lot of tension among the student movement activists, and the Communist Youth leadership was isolated, locked up in the party headquarters.

One day before October 2, we had met with the PCM leadership. Present at the meeting were Arnoldo Martínez Verdugo and Eduardo Montes, in whose house we met, taking many security measures. The leadership told us that they had information that the “hardliners” in the government were pressing to resolve the situation using “large-scale military repression.” The leadership’s proposal was to have the political prisoners, the majority of whom were PCM members, go on a hunger strike, to be announced at Tlatelolco on October 2.

I never understood—or I didn’t want to see—the gravity of the situation.

To conclude, I must mention that, because of its size, the Tlatelolco massacre was considered a crime against humanity and the Mexican government policy, genocide, according to international human rights legislation. ■■■