

A HONDURAN WOMAN SPEAKS FROM THE HEART



**THE STORY OF
ELVIRA ALVARADO**



**“We’re not fighting
for theories.
We’re not fighting
for communism
or Marxism.
We’re fighting for
justice.”**

Our Struggle to Recover the Land

The first Agrarian Reform Law in Honduras was started by President Ramon Villeda Morales in the early 1960s. We never called him Villeda Morales. We called him *El Pajarito Pechito Rojo*, Little Robin Redbreast, because he was from the west and there was a famous song about a robin who flew in from the west.

Anyway, El Pajarito was pretty liberal minded, and when he came to power there was more freedom for the campesinos to organize and make their demands for land. In 1961 El Pajarito created the National Agrarian Institute, INA, to be in charge of distributing land.

Meanwhile, he was trying to write up an agrarian reform law that would make it legal for poor campesinos to take over private and state land that wasn't being used. But of course the big landowners and the banana companies—Standard Fruit and United Fruit—were up in arms, because it meant they would lose a lot of land. So they pressured the politicians to water it down. By the time it passed Congress in 1962, it was so watered down it was practically worthless.

Then El Pajarito was kicked out by Osvaldo Lopez Arellano, a general. The first thing Lopez Arellano did was try to destroy the most outspoken campesino group at that time, FENACH, and replace it with another organization, ANACH, that was more pro-government. There was a lot of repression against the campesinos and workers when Lopez Arellano first came to power.

Lopez Arellano eventually handed over the government to a civilian, but that didn't last long. There was a lot of pressure from the campesinos for land, and the politicians were so busy fighting among themselves that they couldn't do anything else. So Lopez Arellano kicked the civilians out and took over again. But this time he made a deal with the unions and the campesino groups. He won their support by promising to make reforms.

One of the first things he did when he took over in 1972 was to declare a temporary Agrarian Reform Law and then pass a final one in 1975. This is the law that's still in effect today.

The law is very clear. It says that land has to be fully used, that it has to fulfill a social function. Whether the land is private or state owned, if it's not being cultivated or it only has a few head of cattle on it, it's supposed to be turned over to the campesinos.

The National Agrarian Institute, INA, is supposed to uphold the law. It's supposed to make sure the underused land gets turned over to campesino groups. But that's not what actually happens. While the 1975 law is a good law on paper, it's not being put into practice.

This is the way the legal process works. First the campesinos look for a piece of land that isn't being used properly. Then we do our homework. We find out who the owner is, how large the plot is, how much of it is planted, what crops are being grown, if it is used for grazing, how many head of cattle it has, who owns the cattle, whose land it borders. After we study all this, if we're sure the land isn't being used properly, we make a request to INA.

Then INA sends someone to look at the land and do their own study. Sometimes the staff person takes a bribe from the landowner, and then makes up a false report. The report says the land is being well used because it has fruit trees, or because there are crops growing on it. But we get a chance to see the report. And if we know it's false, we denounce it and demand a new investigation.

If the second report still comes back false, we might go directly to the person who did it. "Hey," we say, "why did you make up that false report? You know the things it says aren't true. If you're always on the side of the big land-owners, if you refuse to tell the truth, we're going to denounce you to the press. We're going to tell them you're earning two incomes, one from the agrarian institute and the other from the landowners." And if they keep making false reports, sometimes we put so much pressure on them that they get fired.

If the report comes out in favor of the campesino group, then the regional director signs the request and starts a survey of the group—how many families, how many people in each family, what ages, are they married or single, how many children are in school, how many aren't in school, the names of the parents, what income they have, what they eat, where they

sleep, if they have any land—a ton of questions.

Then they do a study of the land itself. They measure it; they check what quality it is.

When that's all done, the request goes to INA's attorney. From there it goes to the head of the land distribution department. As you can imagine, this whole process takes years. But in the end, the land's supposed to be turned over to the campesinos.

That's the legal process, but we've never gotten land that way. The process just doesn't work. Either the landowner pays everyone at INA off or the request gets bogged down in so much red tape that a decision is never made. We do all the legal steps first. But when that doesn't get anywhere, the campesinos say "the hell with it" and simply take over the land.

We don't call them land takeovers or invasions. No, we call them land recoveries. You read in the paper, "Campesinos invade such and such a piece of land." That's not true. We don't invade land, we recover land that belongs to us by law but was invaded by the big landowners or the foreign companies.

They're the invaders. By what right did they take the land from our families to begin with? By what right do they hold onto the land in violation of the law? Just because they have money to bribe corrupt officials or fancy lawyers to forge their papers?

So when we fight, we're fighting to protect the 1975 Agrarian Reform Law, and to protect the rights of poor campesinos to farm a piece of land.

The first land recovery I participated in was a piece of land owned by a widow named Nicolasa. She was a large landowner, a big *latifundista*. She inherited everything she owned from her father, who was one of those men who got rich by just buying wire and then fencing in the land. He put fences, fences, and more fences wherever he could. He didn't even bother to buy the land, he just put fences around it and said it was his. So this woman inherited all the land her father had stolen from the campesinos.

The campesinos in the area met every month to try to figure out what to do. The bureaucrats at the National Agrarian Institute kept saying to come back next month, or that the request was being processed, that it was in the hands of the court, that it was in the hands of the regional office, that it was in the hands of the national office, that it was in the hands of the Agrarian Council—they kept us chasing our tails and getting nowhere.

Now spring was coming again and the campesinos still had no land to plant, and no way to feed their families. They decided that the only way to get the land was to take it over themselves.

As their union leader, I accepted their decision and agreed to join them. We set the date for the following week, in the middle of the night.

When we entered the field there were about 80 of us, all men except for me. We snuck in very quietly at 2 a.m., taking our mats so we could sleep. The next day the women and children came. The women made tortillas to eat and we all went to work—clearing the land with our machetes, turning it with our hoes, and planting corn and beans. A nearby community, a poor campesino community, helped us out by sending food.

When the landowner found out we had recovered the land, she went running to the police and the army. The next day, three cars full of security police arrived to kick us out.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said to the campesinos. “They’re not going to kill us. Besides, there’s an Agrarian Reform Law in this country that says this land should be ours.”

The police said we better leave immediately or we’d all be arrested. They said they knew we were armed, which wasn’t true—we had only the machetes we work with. The land-owners just spread rumors like that to make the campesinos look bad.

Anyway, we decided to leave so we wouldn’t be arrested. The women put the children on their backs, the men grabbed the machetes and sleeping mats, and we took refuge in the nearby hills.

When the police had gone, we returned. Four days later, the army came.

They said we were thieves for stealing land that wasn't ours, that we had to leave immediately. But we said no, we weren't going anywhere, because we had nowhere to go.

The landowner was with them, and we tried to have a civilized talk with her. We said we weren't asking for all the land, just the part that wasn't being used. We told her how we needed it so we could grow our food to feed our families. But she wouldn't listen to us.

Instead she opened the fences and sent in cattle to trample the corn and beans we planted. We planted again, and she sent in the cattle again. We came back, and so did she. Four times we planted the fields, and four times her cattle tore them up.

One day, after we'd been on the land for a few days in a row, we started to run out of food. "Let's go out in the woods and see if we can find some animals to eat, or maybe some malanga," I suggested. Malanga is a kind of tuber, like a potato, and sometimes you can find it growing wild by the creeks.

"Good idea," said Mario, one of the campesino leaders. "And while the rest of you are away. I'll go water the corn we planted yesterday." So he took four boys with him and went to water the corn.

We learned a great lesson that day, that we should never let down our guard. We'd been there a few days already without the landowner hassling us. So we thought it was all right for us to split up like that.

But Mario never made it back. While he was digging a furrow to irrigate, a shot rang out from the woods and went straight through his head. The landowner had paid someone to follow him and kill him.

The boys who were with him ran to tell the rest of us what happened. "Oh, no. Not Mario," we cried. Mario was a good leader; we all loved and respected him. We couldn't believe he was dead.

I was furious. "Let's go after those murderers," I yelled. "We can't let them get away with this!" When I get mad, there's no stopping me. I grabbed my machete and went to hunt them down. All the campesinos followed me. We didn't even stop to think that it was our machetes against their

guns.

We walked throughout the woods all day long, but we never found the bastards.

Meanwhile, we'd sent word to our union leaders in the capital. By the time we returned, the head of our union was already there. He was mad as hell.

We took Mario's body to the town and held a vigil. Everyone in the community came to pray for him. His family was crying and crying. It was painful for all of us. You could hardly recognize him, because his head was all crushed.

We collected money to help the family, and after the vigil we went right back to the land. We knew that crying wouldn't get us anywhere. We had to go back to the land and refuse to leave it. We had to use his death to give us even more courage.

The campesinos grabbed whatever they could find—machetes, sticks, stones. And this time we did get some guns—old hunting rifles. Someone in the community rounded them up for us when they saw what had happened.

We charged into the landowner's house. She didn't live there; she lives in a big mansion in the city. But we threw out her managers and servants and took over the house.

Then we waited for the army or the landowner to appear. We were still mad as hell. "OK," we said. "They already killed Mario. Let them come and try to kill us all."

When the army arrived, we told them we weren't as well armed as they were, but that our bullets could still kill. We said we wouldn't open fire unless they did first. They realized they couldn't get us out without a big scandal, so they eventually left us alone.

That's how we won the piece of land those campesinos are farming today—with the sacrifice of one of our best leaders. And as for the landowner's house, we use it for our meetings and for hulling rice.

Another land recovery I led was on a piece of land belonging to the sister-in-law of ex-president Suazo Cordova. The first thing we did once we got on the land was to raise the Honduran flag and the flag of the campesino union. The campesino flag is white, red, and black. White stands for purity, red for blood, and black is a symbol of mourning for the martyrs who died in the struggle.

After we raised the flag, we began planting the fields. The next day the landowner sent a tractor to plow the land. She wanted to tear up our seeds, but she was also trying to prove to the authorities that the land was being well used, since the law says only idle land can be taken over.

We knew that if we let that tractor in, we'd lose the fight. So a few of us jumped in front of the tractor and forced the driver to stop. "You can't plow this land," we shouted. "It belongs to the campesinos now."

"The owner is paying me good money to plow this field," he answered, "and I can't waste my time talking nonsense with a bunch of campesinos."

"Well, you're not coming in," we told him. "We're the owners now, so you might as well turn around and go home." When he looked around and saw he was surrounded by hundreds of men, women, and children, I guess he changed his mind. He turned around and drove off.

We went back to work. Three days later, the landowner's three sons appeared, armed to the teeth. They had rifles and machine guns, weapons they must have gotten from their friends in the military. First they let the cattle in to trample the field, and then they started taking pot-shots at us. "Get down on your bellies," I shouted to the campesinos. "Lie flat and move along like snakes!" We slithered away as fast as we could. The boys kept firing at us, but thank God no one was hurt.

We returned after they left, but we knew the sons would be back to shoot at us again. I knew it was going to be a tough fight and that we had to be prepared for the worst. "Do you have the balls to really win this fight, or don't you?"

I asked the campesinos. They said yes, that they had no intention of turning back. So we came up with a new plan.

The next time the landowner's sons appeared, we'd be ready for them. The bravest man would stay up front with me, and the rest would be hiding behind us in five rows of ten each.

Saturday, they drove up with their rifles and machine guns. They cut down the fence to let the cattle trample our fields again. But we were hiding behind the bushes, surrounding them. I told the men, "When I wave this stick, I'll jump out. Then you all jump out behind me."

I waved the stick and jumped out, and they all followed. We captured two of the boys and tied them up. The third son, who was still in the car, went for his gun.

"If you shoot," I warned him, "your brothers are dead." He looked over at his brothers and saw the blades of the campesinos' machetes at their throats. "Go ahead," I told him. "Shoot or drop your gun." He dropped his gun and the campesinos ran and surrounded the car.

I was holding a bag with tortillas and a napkin in it, since I'd been eating my lunch when the action started. I turned around, grabbed a stick and put it in the bag. Then I jumped in front of the brother in the car, holding the bag with the stick in it as if it were a pistol.

"We're not going to kill you," I told him, waving the bag with the tortillas in front of his face. "We just want to make sure that you're going to leave us alone. That's all we want. This land now belongs to us, and we don't want you coming around to bother us any more. Now get out of here."

You should've seen how frightened he was! He really thought the stick was a gun. He didn't even look behind at his two brothers. He just zoomed out of there as fast as he could.

Then I went over to where the two brothers were tied up. "Did you check them out and make sure they're not hiding any weapons?" I asked the campesinos. "Oh, yes," the campesinos said. "We went over them real good. We even took off their boots and shook them out. They're clean."

But something bothered me. There was something about one of them that just wasn't right. He had a bulge between his legs that was too big to

be real. So I looked and looked, and finally I went up to him and stuck my hand down his pants. "Let's see what you've got here," I shouted. And you know what I pulled out? A big plastic bag full of marijuana!

"Ay, Senora," he said. "The army will come and find me carrying marijuana. Can't you just bury it in the ground and not tell them?" he pleaded. He was probably afraid of what his mother would say.

"Do you think I'm stupid?," I asked him. "You want me to bury it so that you can say it's mine? No way. When the soldiers come I'll turn you in, marijuana and all."

Then we waited for the army to come. I told the campesinos not to worry if they arrested me, because the union would soon find out and would come to get me out. I explained that if I was arrested, the campesinos should hide until the soldiers left, but come back the next day.

"If you get scared and don't come back," I warned them, "then we've lost the fight." In the meantime, I told them to start weeding the fields with their machetes, so that when the soldiers arrived they would find them at work.

You wouldn't believe how quickly the soldiers came. When a poor man is in trouble, they're nowhere to be found. But when a rich man needs help, they show up in no time.

Two cars full of soldiers came roaring in. Their leader. Colonel Aspra, jumped out and ran up to me. "Senora," he said, "you're the leader, aren't you?" "I'm just a poor campesina," I told him. "There are 50 campesinos here, and no one is the leader."

"Senora," he said, "don't you know that kidnapping these men and tying them up is a serious offense? And so is trying to take over land that doesn't belong to you."

"Colonel," I told him, "you can't tell us these lands don't belong to us, because you're not a representative of the National Agrarian Institute. We have no reason to talk to you about our rights under the agrarian reform. You're from the army, and all you know about is guns. You shouldn't go around sticking your nose into matters you don't know anything about."

I think he was amazed I had the nerve to talk to him like that. “We’re just here to protect the law,” he said.

I laughed. “If you were really here to protect the law, you’d be giving this land to the campesinos. You’re not here to protect the law; you’re here to protect the rich.

“If you want to arrest me for kidnapping, go ahead,” I told him. “But the truth is that these boys came here to kill us, just like they did last week. We captured them to avoid a massacre. If you want to take them, go ahead. We have no reason to keep them here. And if you’d rather arrest us instead, go ahead. But be clear that we’re not here because we want to cause trouble. We’re here because there’s an Agrarian Reform Law in this country, approved by the President of the Republic and by the military itself. And if you don’t want to uphold that law, then we campesinos must do it for you. So if you want to arrest me for merely upholding the law, then go ahead.”

Then I remembered the marijuana. “And you know what else?” I told the colonel. “Not only do the rich violate the Agrarian Reform Law, but they’re also drug addicts.” I pulled out the bag of marijuana. “You know where he was hiding this, colonel? Want to take a guess? He had it right here,” I pointed to the young man’s penis. “Right here between his testicles.”

“Ah-ha,” said the colonel. “They caught you carrying marijuana. Now you’re in trouble.” So we untied the two boys and the soldiers took them away. They held them in jail for two days, and gave them a stiff fine for possession of marijuana.

We campesinos had a good laugh. “You know how happy the soldiers must be with us?” I told them. “Not only did they get to pocket the big fine, but they also got to smoke the marijuana.”

A few months later, the National Agrarian Institute gave the campesinos legal title to 50 acres of that land.

It’s not as if we always win. There are some recoveries that just don’t work. I remember one piece of land that belonged to a rich doctor. We

took over that land four times, and four times they kicked us out. We finally took the case to the Agrarian Council.

The Agrarian Council is made up of government lawyers and representatives of some of the campesino groups. So sometimes we get a fair hearing. In this case we won, and the campesinos were so excited that they finally had the land.

But the doctor took the case to the Supreme Court. The cases hardly ever go to the Supreme Court; but when they do it's usually the rich who win, because they have the best lawyers. And that's what happened. We put up a good fight, but we didn't win.

And don't think that even when we do get the land titles our problems are over. No, they're just beginning.

The Agrarian Reform Law in this country is supposed to be an integral law. That means that when the campesinos get the land, they're also supposed to get credit and technical assistance. It's supposed to be a whole package. The campesinos need credit to buy seeds, to rent a tractor or oxen to plow the land, and to have something to live on until the harvest. And they need technical assistance to figure out what varieties grow best and how to market their crops.

But the truth is that if you get the land you don't get technical assistance. And if you get technical assistance then you don't get credit. There's always something missing. What good is the land without money to make it produce? What good is technical assistance if you don't have the money to buy what the agronomist advises?

For example, our campesino organization works with a group called El Carmen. This group won a piece of land; but instead of using it to grow corn and beans on, INA encouraged the campesinos to grow sugar cane and loaned them \$3,000 to grow the cane.

But what happened? The Ministry of Natural Resources was supposed to give them technical assistance, because the campesinos had never grown sugar cane before and needed help. But planting time came and no one showed up to help them decide what was the best type of sugar cane for their land. So the campesinos went on their own and bought some cane

to plant, but it wasn't the right kind. They didn't manage to grow enough to pay back the loan.

Other times the campesinos get the loan, but it comes too late. It arrives after planting season. So they plant late and the crops grow in the heat of the dry season. The project fails and they can't pay back the loan.

When the campesinos are in debt, it makes it harder for them to feed their families. The family needs corn and beans, but to pay back the loans they have to grow cash crops—like rice or sugar cane or watermelons—and that means less land for food.

Getting loans from INA is very complicated, because it's a government institution and there's always a lot of red tape. It's even harder to get loans for women's groups. If the women want to get credit, they have to be the wives of the men who have legal title to the land, they have to know how to read and write, and there are a whole bunch of other requirements. One women's group is trying to get \$250 for a corn mill so they won't have to grind the corn by hand. They've been waiting two years for a loan from INA, and they're still waiting.

Another women's group is trying to get a consumers' store, because they have nowhere close by to buy their cooking oil, rice, soap, sugar, coffee—all the things we campesinos need. The nearest store is far away in town. They have to walk for miles just to buy a bar of soap. The prices in town are high, and the women have no transportation to carry their packages back home. So they want a store in their own community that sells the basics at cheaper prices. But we still haven't been able to get a loan from INA, because their husbands owe INA \$1,500. Until the men pay back the loan, INA won't give any money to the women.

Not only do we have to fight for credit and technical assistance, but once we get the land we also have to fight for water, schools, clinics, and all the things a community needs. And we still have to deal with the landowners, who continue to harass the campesinos.

There are even cases where we've gotten the title, and INA has turned around and tried to take it away again. We have a group in La Palma that had been farming a piece of land for about eight years. They'd been farming without title to the land, and it took them eight years to finally

get legal title.

But no sooner had they gotten the title than this woman came along and said the land was hers. She went with her lawyer to INA and convinced them she owned the land. So INA sent the group an eviction notice.

The group contacted me immediately. I was furious and went storming into INA. "What on earth do you think you're doing?" I asked them. "How can you give the campesinos the land and then say it belongs to someone else? Are you out of your minds? Those campesinos aren't budging."

The campesinos refused to leave, and INA still hasn't been able to get them out. But it just shows you how crazy the whole process is.

Right now I'm trying to deal with another case in La Palma where a campesino group was tricked by a mine owner. This group won a piece of land that included a limestone quarry. The campesinos mined the quarry and sold the limestone to a cement factory. But they didn't have any trucks or equipment, so it was difficult for them to make much money.

One day, a mine owner came and asked the campesinos for permission to work the mine. He said he'd give them \$200 up front, and \$50 a month. That was more than they were making, so they agreed.

The mine owner got a lawyer to make up the papers. Then he took the contract to the group's leaders to sign. The campesinos realized that the only thing the document talked about was the \$200 up front, not the monthly payment. But the mine owner said, "Oh, that doesn't come in the contract. Don't worry, you'll get your \$50 a month, but the contract is only for the initial fee."

So the trucks started coming in and taking out the lime. And the mine owner was making good money, but he never paid the campesinos the \$50 a month he'd promised. He paid the first \$200, that's all. For four years he worked the mines. Four years! And he didn't pay the campesinos a cent.

The bastard lived far away, and he never came to the mine himself. He just sent his workers. So the campesinos had to spend their own money

trying to find him. They'd go to his house, and he'd never be there. Wherever they looked for him, he was somewhere else.

Finally the campesinos came to our organization for help. "This man cheated us," they said. "And we want to do something about it."

We told them to stop the trucks from coming in until the man paid up. So they all took their machetes and stopped the trucks. "No more," they told the drivers. "You'll have to turn around and go home. Just tell your boss you can't come in any more until he pays us the money he owes us."

Soon after that, the campesinos got a letter that on such-and-such a day, the mine owner would be there with the local judge. The campesinos asked me to be there to defend them.

The mine owner showed up with his wife and the judge, who was obviously already on their side. I told the judge that I was there to represent the group.

The judge read us the document about the \$200. "Yeah," I said, "but what about the \$50 a month he promised to give them? Why didn't he put that in the document?"

"Fifty dollars a month?" said the mine owner. "I never promised any such thing."

"Yes you did," the campesinos yelled. "You're lying. You said you'd pay us every month, and you've been working here for four years, making a ton of money, and you haven't paid us a cent."

The judge ordered us to let their trucks in. "No way," I said. "Their trucks aren't coming in until he pays up. If he wants to continue working here, he'll just have to add up \$50 for every month he hasn't paid, and give that wad of bills to the campesinos. If not, then the hell with him."

The mine owner's wife was furious. She started yelling and screaming at me, saying that I was disrespectful, that I was just a dirty, loud-mouthed campesina. "You have to let our tractors in," she screamed. "Those campesinos signed the papers." Her face got all red and puffy. I thought she was about to explode!

The judge got mad at me, too. He said I was inciting the campesinos, and he threatened to throw me in jail.

“Look,” I said to the judge, “I’m not being disrespectful. I’m only defending the campesinos. How can this man get away with lying and cheating? He’s the one that should be in jail. And if it’s a crime to make a fuss, then why don’t you arrest his wife? She’s the one who’s shouting and screaming and raising hell. You know why you don’t? Because you’re on the side of the mine owner. You’re supposed to uphold the law, but instead you defend the rich.”

The three of them got mad and left. About a week later the judge issued a warrant to arrest the three campesinos who had signed the document. The police went out looking for them, but they went into hiding. Since the police couldn’t find them, they arrested another campesino instead.

“You bastard,” the police said to him, sticking their rifle butts in his back, “show us where those sons-of-bitches are hiding.” He wouldn’t say anything, so they dragged him off to jail.

The poor campesino’s still in jail. I have to go find out what they intend to do with him and how I can get a lawyer to defend him.

When you think about it, the campesino has the patience of a saint. He’s deceived, cheated, and tricked, time and time again. But the campesino is patient. Look how that group at La Palma waited four years for the mine owner to keep his word! Four years!

But there comes a time when their patience wears thin. There comes a time when they get tired of being humiliated and they say, “We’ve been pushed around for too long. Enough is enough.”

It’s dangerous when the campesinos react, because their reaction is often violent. They say, “Now we’ll see who’s got balls. We’re gonna solve this with our machetes.” And when the campesinos fight, they really fight.

So one of our biggest problems is calming the campesinos when they get mad. We say, “Yes, it’s true we’ve been cheated. It’s true we’ve been suffering for too long. But we have to keep struggling peacefully, because

if we take the violent route we'll lose everything."

Sometimes we have to calm them down, and other times we have to give them courage. When we go to recover the land, we have to keep their spirits up. The odds against us are so great that we constantly have to convince the campesinos that it's possible to win.

At the same time we have to prepare them for the worst. We tell them how the landowners pay thugs to kill the campesinos; we explain that others have died in recoveries. We make sure they understand that they have to be ready to be jailed, to be abused, to be persecuted, and if need be, to die.

And we have to be right there with them in the trenches. Otherwise they'll say, "Our leaders are worth shit." We have to show them that we're with them all the way. That's the only way we can gain their trust.

Because the land recoveries are no joke. And the only ones that get killed are the campesinos. You never hear of a landowner getting killed. That's unheard of.

But look at how the campesinos die. There's the massacre at Talanquera in 1972, where the landowner found out the day and time the campesinos planned to recover the land. When this group entered at four in the morning, the landlord's thugs were waiting for them and opened fire. Six campesinos were killed.

Then there's the massacre at Los Horcones in 1975, when one of the unions, the UNC, was staging a march on the capital to pressure the government to pass the Agrarian Reform Law. The cattle ranchers paid the military to kill the campesinos. Five demonstrators were killed at a UNC training center. Nine others—including two priests—were tortured and killed at the ranch of Jose Manuel Zelaya, and their mutilated bodies were found stuffed in a well.

There was another massacre on the north coast that I don't know much about. And when we recovered land from the widow Nicolasa, Mario was killed.

The campesinos don't have guns, only machetes. When I join the

recoveries, I usually don't even have a machete. Maybe a knife that I use to peel oranges. What good is a knife going to do me? That's why the landowners kill us, because we can't defend ourselves. It breaks my heart to see my companeros cut down, defenseless. And the landowner with his guns and automatic weapons.

It makes me so mad. I just get furious when I see how we campesinos die, like dogs. Our lives aren't worth a penny. When a rich man dies, a fleet of fancy cars takes him to his grave. When a campesino dies, we're lucky if we can find a few pieces of wood to make a coffin. And that hurts. It hurts bad to see a campesino die in a land recovery. I've never in my life cried like I cried when I saw our companeros killed.

I know that the life of the poor is one of suffering, and I don't cry over that. But when I see a campesino killed, then I cry. I cry to see them die with no way to defend themselves. Like a dog.

I don't even want to remember. I don't want to remember the time the four companeros were shot in Talanguita. Four good friends. We all went to bury them. We all had to look at the four of them in those boxes, with their heads blown to bits by the landowner's bullets. It pains me to remember those moments.

That's why I struggle and why I'll never stop struggling. Never. Because with all these campesinos who have died fighting for a stinking piece of land, how can we stop now? No. We have to fight with more courage, more conviction, more strength.

Turn your fears to strengths

When I hear that all this military buildup in Honduras is just trying to maintain peace in our country, I ask myself what peace they're talking about. Maybe it's peaceful for the politicians. The congressmen make \$3,000 a month; their bellies are full of food and drink; they've got a wad of bills in their pockets. So for them there's peace. But not for the campesinos. Do you think a mother who can't send her children to school because she doesn't have any clothes to put on their backs feels at peace? Do you think a mother who watches her child die because she doesn't have a penny to take her to the doctor feels at peace? To protect this great peace we have, the politicians have sold our country off to the United States. They've made us a colony of the United States. They're only doing it, they say, to protect our national security. What national security? The national security they're protecting is that of their own big stomachs. They're protecting the fat checks that come pouring in from the United States. If I had a chance to talk to Reagan, which of course I wouldn't since Reagan is only interested in talking to the rich. I'd tell him to take all the money he's sending to Honduras— all the guns, all the tanks, all the helicopters, all the bases, all the big, expensive projects he's financing—and get the hell out of our country. We don't need the U.S. money. We never get to see any of it anyway. What do you think that money goes for? To the foreign bank accounts of the rich, to line the pockets of our corrupt politicians, to give the military more power to repress the poor. It's the rich who need the U.S. aid, not the poor. We've lived for years with only our beans and tortillas, and we'll go on living with our beans and tortillas.

I must admit that sometimes I get so overwhelmed by the odds against us that I break down and cry. I see our children dying of hunger, and the ones that live have no jobs, no education, no future. I see the military getting more and more repressive. I see us being persecuted, jailed, tortured. I get exhausted by all the internal problems between the campesino organizations. And I see all of Central America going up in flames. I start to wonder if it's worth it. I start to think maybe I should just stay home making tortillas. But whenever I have these doubts, whenever I start to cry, I put my hands into fists and say to myself, "Make your tears turn into anger, make your tears turn into strength." As soon as I stop crying, I feel a sense of power go through my body. And I get back to work with even more enthusiasm, with more conviction than

ever. When I see some of my other companeros get depressed, I say to them, “Snap out of it. Get back to work. We have too much to do to waste our time getting depressed.” And they do the same to me. One thing that gives us a great boost is when we hear that there are other people in other countries who are on our side. I later learned that there are also gringos in the United States who don’t agree with their government’s policies in Central America. It’s amazing that Reagan has so much power and he still hasn’t been able to conquer all the people in the United States. It shows he’s not as powerful as we thought. You can’t imagine how much courage and hope it gives me to know that we have friends in the United States. Imagine that! Friends in the United States! Who would’ve ever believed it!

It’s hard to think of change taking place in Central America without there first being changes in the United States. As we say in Honduras, “Sin el perro, no hay rabia”—without the dog, there wouldn’t be rabies. So you Americans who really want to help the poor have to change your own government first. You Americans who want to see an end to hunger and poverty have to take a stand. You have to fight just like we’re fighting—even harder. You have to be ready to be jailed, to be abused, to be repressed. And you have to have the character, the courage, the morale, and the spirit to confront whatever comes your way. If you say, “Oh, the United States is so big and powerful, there’s nothing we can do to change it,” then why bother talking about solidarity? If you think like that, you start to feel insignificant and your spirit dies. That’s very dangerous. For as long as we keep our spirits high, we continue to struggle. We campesinos are used to planting seeds and waiting to see if the seeds bear fruit. We’re used to working on harsh soil. And when our crops don’t grow, we’re used to planting again and again until they take hold. Like us, you must learn to persist. You also have to be fearless. If you begin with fear—fear of being persecuted or of going to jail or of being criticized—you might as well not start. I don’t know if it’s the same in the United States, but here people are terrified that they’ll be called communist. But if they call us communists, we have to tell them that that’s a bunch of bull. We’re not fighting for theories. We’re not fighting for communism or Marxism. We’re fighting for justice.

We can’t be afraid of criticism. We have to answer that we know where we’re going and why we’re going there, and if anyone wants to follow us, we’ll be glad to show them the way. You also have to be clear about your

objectives, about why you're struggling. You can't struggle just because someone else tells you it's a good idea. No, you've got to feel the struggle. You've got to be completely convinced that what you're struggling for is just. And then you have to have a plan. What are you trying to achieve? What methods will you use? How many people do you have? Who can you count on for help? How much money do you have? How long will it take you to reach a certain number of people? What will you ask them to do? You have to begin educating people, telling them the truth about what's happening in the world. Because if the press in the United States is anything like it is in Honduras, the people aren't well informed. You have to teach them what's really happening in the United States, what your government is really doing. And once you've educated people, then get them organized. Start out forming small groups, first in your own house, then with your neighbors. You might have to start out with just a handful of people—three women or three men. It doesn't matter if you start out small. Things that start out small get bigger and bigger. One group becomes two groups, two groups become four; and before you know it, you have a lot of well-organized people. Then you start dividing up the tasks, and you make up your committees—the education committee, the women's committee, the youth committee. And soon you branch out to other neighborhoods and other villages and cities. The other thing you have to do is make allies. I used to think you had to be poor to be part of this struggle. But there are people in Honduras who aren't poor, yet they're on our side. They're well-educated people—doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers—who identify with the poor. I suppose it's the same in the United States. So don't only organize the poor and working people. You can also look for middle-class people, or even rich people who want to help change things.

If you sit around thinking what to do and end up not doing anything, why bother even thinking about it? You're better off going out on the town and having a good time. No, we have to think and act. That's what we're doing here, and that's what you have to do. We're not asking for food or clothing or money. We want you with us in the struggle. We want you to educate your people. We want you to organize your people. We want you to denounce what your government is doing in Central America. From those of you who feel the pain of the poor, who feel the pain of the murdered, the disappeared, the tortured, we need more than sympathy. We need you to join the struggle. Don't be afraid, gringos. Keep your spirits high. And remember, we're right there with you!



ELVIRA WITH TWO OF HER DAUGHTERS AND GRANDKIDS

A Honduran Woman Speaks From the Heart



is an award-winning 1987 oral history of Elvia Alvarado, a courageous *campesina* (peasant) activist in Honduras, one of the countries most impoverished by imperialism in Central America. Trained by the Catholic Church to organize women's groups to combat malnutrition, Alvarado began to question why campesinos were malnourished to begin with. Her growing social awareness, her travels by foot over the back roads of Honduras, and her conversations with people from all over land gave her powerful insights on the ravages caused by capitalist colonization. Working as a *campesino* organizer, Alvarado led dangerous land recovery actions to recuperate *campesino* ancestral lands. As a result of these activities, she was harassed, jailed, and tortured at the hands of the Honduran military. In this republication, Alvarado details a suspenseful account of *campesino* direct actions to recuperate stolen lands. The final section outlines Alvarado's advice for those seeking to organize autonomous resistance against imperialism.

Translated and edited by Medea Benjamin.



@LOVE_AND_DISORDER_