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Persistent Resistance: Commitment and Community in the Plowshares Movement

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Abstract

Although we know much about social movement recruitment, very little research focuses on member retention over time. Using the Plowshares

movement as a case study, this article addresses the question of how long-term activist commitment is cultivated and sustained in a high-risk movement. Based on participant observation, in-depth interviews and survey data, I conclude that this movement has survived because leaders formed communities that function as plausibility structures. Through various rituals and cultural practices, these Catholic Left communities reinforce activist identity and strengthen members' normative, affective, and continuance commitment. Moreover, leaders implement strategies for countering the factors that foster movement exiting—namely, biographical unavailability, burnout, and weakening of ties to activist networks. By offering material and emotional support, and assistance with family responsibilities, these communities help activists overcome the barriers to long-term movement participation.

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