

Review: Voice of Fire

“The time of revolution has not passed”

Dermot Sreenan

1995

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So reads the first line of Harry Cleaver's introduction to this 128 page book about the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army). The EZLN woke the world up to their struggle on the first day of 1994, when they took over several towns in the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Plenty has happened since then, including a cease-fire and failed negotiations with the government.

"Voice of Fire" is important for two reasons. Firstly, it contains everything that is known about the EZLN. It has all their press interviews, letters, communiqués, and it has responses to the Mexican Government's propaganda. It is the largest and most comprehensive collection of such material in the English language.

Secondly, this revolt, or uprising comes after the collapse of the Eastern block, and that is reflected by the libertarian outlook of the EZLN in the book. They repeatedly say that they are neither "Maoists or Marxists".

The speed at which this book was compiled was also important. After the Russian revolution, it took people years to find out what had really happened. In our modern world, this book and photo essay was produced within a year.

"Voice of Fire" begins with "The Southeast In Two Winds", an essay on conditions in Chiapas by subcommander Marcos (the spokesperson of the EZLN). It is a good starting point, as you learn about the conditions of the indigenous people prior to their turn to arms. The next chapter covers the revolt of January '94, along with the revolutionary laws passed, and the Declaration of War on the Government of Mexico.

POLITICAL CONFUSION

Reading this book, I found myself searching for the politics I agreed with. At first, beauty was most definitely in the eyes of the beholder. Subcommander Marcos is quoted in the introduction; "Let's destroy this State, this State system. Let's open up this space and confront the people with ideas, not weapons." As an anarchist I enjoyed reading these lines.

But the more I examined the demands of the EZLN, the more contradictions were found. They say that they are interested in destroying the state, but they call for the setting up of a transitional government until fair elections can be held. They also call for the right to "govern ourselves autonomously because we no longer want to be subject to the will of national and foreign powers".

A major factor which came across in the reading of this book was the apparent democratic structure of the EZLN. The political leadership and organisation of the Zapatistas comes from the CCRI-GC (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee — General Command). This was formed as the revolutionary organisation of the EZLN grew.

Javier a member of the Clandestine committee explains it; "But, as it advanced, each people has elected its representatives, its leaders. By making the decision in that way, the people themselves proposed who will lead these organisations. The people themselves have named us....In that way we came to be the CCRI."

Another member of the CCRI-GC, Isaac, says that; "if some member of the CCRI does not do their work, if they do not respect the people well, then compa(sic), it is not your place to be there. Then, well excuse us, but we will have to put another in place. " So it appears that the EZLN

functions on a delegate based democracy. The EZLN army is subservient to the decisions made by the CCRI-GC.

This lesson of democracy was learned by the 12 young revolutionaries (of which Marcos was one) who entered the Lacandona jungle in 1983 to help the oppressed indigenous population. The indigenous people organise themselves in a democratic fashion and so this is reflected in the organisation of the EZLN.

HURLERS FROM THE DITCH

Another factor which came as a surprise to me amongst all the demands for “Freedom, Justice, and Liberty”, was the humour. Marcos recalls how on the night of the attack on San Cristobal he was advised by a passing New Years drunk that he should have waited a couple of days longer, so that they would get covered in a certain Mexican Newspaper. It appears that hurlers on the ditch are not confined to Ireland.

People who are interested in revolutionary politics should read this book and form their own opinions on the EZLN. We have to continually learn from struggle. The struggle of the oppressed is the struggle of the left. The quest for freedom requires us to learn from history and not to repeat mistakes.

The delegate based democracy which the EZLN appear to be practising is a step in the right direction. It is unfortunate, that despite historic lessons and the march of time, delegate based democracy, i.e. the will of the people being the will of the organisation, can never be practised within the ideology of authoritarian socialists.

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