

# **Cascading Currencies and National Liberation — the Situation in México**

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*[Update as of Feb. 20: This article was written before Feb. 9, when México's president, Ernesto Zedillo, announced a new offensive against the Zapatistas. The Mexican government now claims to have identified several Zapatista leaders, including Subcommander Marcos, and to have arrested Zapatistas in Mexico City and Veracruz who were preparing to spread the struggle beyond Chiapas. The EZLN responds in their Feb. 9 communiqué [page 3]. In the recent offensive, the Mexican Federal Army took Zapatista towns on the edge of the Lacandona Jungle, causing the Zapatistas to retreat into the jungle, along with the majority of the non-combatant population. Reports of torture, murder, and rape from areas where the civilian population could not retreat are gruesome indeed. The army has also indiscriminately bombed civilian areas in this new offensive, just like in Jan. 1994. Demonstrations have shaken Mexico City this past week, showing the Mexican government the unpopularity of their brutal offensive and forcing them to call a brief halt to it after one week. Demonstrations have also taken place throughout North America and Europe in support of the EZLN. The Mexican Federal Army soon renewed hostilities against the Zapatistas.]*

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The situation in México is precarious as we go to press. The devaluation of the peso has caused the cost of everything to rise, with no corresponding wage increase anywhere in sight. Meanwhile, the Zapatista National Liberation Army [EZLN] had met with representatives of the Institutional Revolutionary Party [PRI] government in the EZLN-controlled Lacandona Jungle about restarting a dialogue for peace. Not long before these talks began, the EZLN issued a "Third Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle," [see pages 18–19] calling for a National Liberation Movement led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas to fight the PRI state by any means necessary. The choice of Cárdenas to lead this movement raises important questions about the EZLN, their politics, and the future of the revolution they have begun in México. In the US the National Commission for Democracy in México, USA [NCDM] was having some success in bringing local Zapatista solidarity groups of various political orientations together into a national organization.

## **The Plummeting Peso**

As Carlos Salinas de Gortari's term ended as President of México, it became apparent that the peso, México's currency, was overvalued. Devaluations of the peso have occurred at the end of each Mexican president's six-year term for the past few presidencies, each time plunging the country into economic crises of varying degrees. A devaluation toward the end of Salinas's term would have hurt the PRI's chances in the August elections and Salinas's candidacy to become head of the new World Trade Organization. As México's currency reserves dwindled too low to support México's debt a devaluation could not be put off any longer.

With the devaluation of the peso, the price of imported goods in México skyrocketed, causing a chain reaction that caused the price of everything to rise. Despite an order by the Mexican government that stores not raise prices for 60 days, all necessities immediately became more expensive. Many families suddenly found themselves unable to purchase even milk or eggs, much less meat. Despite the devaluation, an unusually recalcitrant Mexican Labor Confederation [CTM, the PRI-controlled union that represents non-agricultural Mexican workers in the state structure] agreed to limit wages to the previously agreed 7% raise for this year. Meanwhile, inflation spiraled

far beyond 7%. Although Clinton's \$50+ billion bailout of México will stabilize inflation, prices are being stabilized much higher than they were in mid-December.

Lamely, the PRI government tried to blame the crisis on the Zapatista offensive that began on Dec. 19 (the first devaluation took place on Dec. 20). However, the PRI was not convincing, and the real reasons for the devaluation were soon exposed. Had the PRI succeeded in deceiving the Mexican people about the root of their newly increased economic misery, they may have gained the popular backing necessary for the military offensive against the Zapatistas that some foreign investors in México have been pushing for.

## **War, But No Shooting**

On Dec. 19 the EZLN announced that it had broken through the Mexican Federal Army's encirclement of its territory, and the war was back on (see communiqué in the last issue of Love and Rage). However, this was a war in which the side that fired the first shot would lose, by virtue of losing the support of Mexican 'civil society,' which supported a peaceful end to the conflict. A cease-fire was called after a few days, and, on Jan. 15, representatives of the PRI government had met with the Zapatistas in Zapatista territory in order to set the terms for negotiating a peace. It seems unlikely that these peace negotiations will be more fruitful than the ones held in early 1994. In June 1994 the Zapatistas rejected the government's response to their demands as being inadequate and negotiated in bad faith. To whose advantage the delay in hostilities caused by the peace negotiations works is an open question. The government is seeking to isolate the EZLN by showing how "unreasonable" they are for not accepting the government's offers, while the EZLN is working to expand its base beyond Chiapas. It has recently spoken of other armed groups in other parts of México that support it, but little evidence of formidable groups has been presented. These statements, along with the EZLN's failure to follow through on promises of massive upheaval following a PRI victory in the Aug. 21, 1994 presidential elections and following the installation of Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León as president on Dec. 1, may weaken the EZLN's ability to convince the Mexican masses to join in and spread their revolution throughout México.

There is also some question about the strength of the base the EZLN is creating outside of Chiapas. The National Democratic Convention [CND] formed in August at the behest of the EZLN in an attempt to spread the struggle. In the spirit of democracy, the EZLN refused to control the CND, leaving a vacuum that was soon filled by the Democratic Revolutionary Party [PRD]. Some prominent CND members even denounced the EZLN when they renewed hostilities against the Mexican government in December.

## **Reformists or Anti-Vanguardists?**

On Jan. 1, 1995 the EZLN issued the "Third Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle," in which it called for the formation of a National Liberation Movement [MLN] to be headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Presumably, the MLN has been formed partially in response to the problems that have arisen with the CND. The MLN, in contrast to the CND, which was created to struggle through peaceful means to incorporate part of Mexican "civil society" into the Zapatista base, is meant to "struggle by all means." This broadly incorporates other armed groupings and groups that

were excluded from the CND due to their militancy and sectarianism within the CND. [Some experiences of the CND can be found on pages 20–21]

However, the choice of Cárdenas to head the MLN raises questions. An important differentiation between the EZLN and other revolutionary armies that have appeared in Latin America is that seizing state power is not an objective of the Zapatistas. Rather, the EZLN has stated that it wishes to open up political space so that “real democracy” can take place and the people can democratically decide how they want to live (as we have seen in the case of the CND, unless a fight is waged to keep a political space open, it will be filled by an opportunistic force such as the PRD). Revolutionary anti-authoritarians supporting the EZLN have tended to view this aim in the best possible light: that the EZLN does not have any pretensions to represent anyone other than themselves, and sees a need to negotiate how México will be governed with other forces in México. Others have seen the EZLN’s lack of focus on seizing state power and willingness to negotiate with the government as a sign that they are merely “armed reformists” and not revolutionaries. In reality, the Zapatistas probably lie somewhere along this continuum, and not at either pole.

Some people see the choice of Cárdenas to lead the MLN as confirmation of the EZLN’s armed reformist direction. Cárdenas was a member of the PRI and a fairly typical, if liberal, PRI governor in the state of Michoacán. Cárdenas has always been a member of México’s ruling class. In 1988 he ran for president (and lost only due to fraud) as an independent candidate only because he was upset at not being chosen as the PRI candidate. Had he been selected, he would gladly have run as the PRI candidate. He and other disenfranchised members of the PRI, along with rightward-sliding members of the fragmented left, formed the PRD soon after his 1988 loss. During the 1994 presidential campaign he came out in favor of NAFTA, which the EZLN had called a death sentence for México’s poor. The EZLN was extremely critical of Cárdenas in communiqués and in person when Cárdenas first visited Zapatista territory in May 1994. Cárdenas seems an odd choice to head a radical movement ready to combat the PRI by any means necessary.

There are two likely possibilities as to why the EZLN chose Cárdenas to head the MLN. Many who argue that the EZLN are armed reformists see this as consistent with what they perceive as the EZLN’s strategy. They see an alliance with a reformist member of México’s ruling class, and leader of the liberal PRD, as being natural for the EZLN, who they think are using militant methods to petition for reforms. Others see the selection of Cárdenas as arising out of necessity, due to the difficulties the EZLN has had in building a base outside of Chiapas.

Face-to-face with the vastly superior firepower of the Mexican Federal Army, for the EZLN to survive and make it impossible for the Mexican government to isolate and destroy them, they must extend their struggle to encompass all of México. In the wake of the Aug. 21 elections, the Mexican left has been weakened and demoralized. Although Cárdenas’s politics can barely be called left-wing, he is one of the few individuals on the left in México capable of unifying and mobilizing a large number of people.

However, the politics around which Cárdenas succeeds in mobilizing people, if he succeeds, will probably ultimately work against the EZLN. Should a mass mobilization in México succeed in toppling the PRI, Cárdenas would be more likely to place himself in the presidency and institute liberal reforms rather than carry out the EZLN’s radical plan of land redistribution to those that work it, women’s liberation, and placing factories under workers’ control. He might be similar to his father, Lázaro Cárdenas, who carried out the most extensive land reforms in Mexican history while solidifying PRI rule. In 1919 Emiliano Zapata was assassinated by an agent of Venustiano

Carranza, a fellow revolutionary who was bent on seizing state power. A similar scenario may be in the works for the Zapatistas in an alliance with Cárdenas.

[At the Feb. 4–6 third national meeting of the CND, Cárdenas declined to lead the MLN after it became clear that he did not have the support of a large number of those present. The nascent MLN's politics are as yet unclear.]

## **North American Solidarity**

More than a year into the Zapatista revolution, solidarity groups in the US are being cohered into a more concrete form by the National Commission for Democracy in México, USA. In June the EZLN commissioned Cecilia Rodríguez, a longtime Chicana activist, as their representative in the US. She soon got to work organizing the NCDM in order to consolidate the efforts of the many Zapatista solidarity groups that had spontaneously formed. The NCDM has managed to encompass many of the groups doing Zapatista solidarity work. Within the NCDM, all local groups are autonomous, although there is a leading body based in Texas that officially represents the NCDM as a whole and suggests strategies for the local groups to follow. There are wide political differences within the NCDM, ranging from those such as Love and Rage members and other radicals in the NCDM who think revolution in the US is the best way to effectively aid the Zapatistas, to some who believe that writing congresspeople is an effective strategy for social change. The majority of the NCDM falls widely between these poles. Alongside the task of organizing a base for mass direct action in support of the Zapatistas, the work of distributing the writings of the EZLN and organizing material aid continue, not as charity, but as part of the process of building a base of support for the EZLN and its politics here in the US.

Those wishing to join the Zapatista solidarity movement are encouraged to contact the NCDM and the Love and Rage Mexican Solidarity Working Group.

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