

Mexican rebels host international gathering

Workers Solidarity Movement

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In August of 1996 3,000 people from all over the world gathered in jungle camps as guests of the EZLN to discuss building a global fight against neo-liberal capitalism. The EZLN is an army that has been in rebellion against the Mexican state since January 1 1994. Workers Solidarity Movement member Andrew Flood who attended as a delegate from the Irish Mexico Group reports on this conference.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the gathering was that it took place. We live in a period where comparatively very few people still believe it is possible to radically change the world they live in. Mass unemployment, poverty and violence are seen as permanent features of our society rather than problems which can be solved. Where people do fight back, as we've seen in Ireland around the Anti-Water Charges campaigns, these struggles tend to be around single issues and do not easily generalise into a wider fight against the system.

Many people think that there is no alternative to capitalism. The collapse of the Eastern European regimes, the rightward shift of the social democratic parties and the ending of national liberation struggles through various peace processes are incorrectly seen as meaning all alternatives to capitalism have failed. The 3,000 people who made the sometimes difficult journey to five centres in the mountains and jungle of the Mexican South-East, were by their presence refusing to accept this idea and helping to create a new alternative. So to an extent the most important feature of this gathering was that it could happen, that people engaged in struggles from some 43 countries on the globe, from 'wealthy' Sweden to 'poor' Zaire came together and saw their struggles as having a common purpose.

The people holding the conference were a rebel army called the EZLN or Zapatistas who rose up on New Years Day 1994, seizing four towns in the region. They attracted attention in anarchist circles because their early statements said they were not interested in seizing power for themselves and made reference to various anarchists from Mexican history as sources of inspiration. To other leftists who had been demoralised by the collapse of what they considered socialism in the 1980s they seemed to offer a new way of struggle, different to the discredited versions they had believed in earlier.

State of siege

The Mexican army have attacked them twice since but mostly there have been ceasefires in force. So when we were there, although the army and police harassed those travelling to the conference sites, this amounted to no more than stamping people's passports and taking their photographs. On the second day the army did fly a plane over several of the sites at tree top height, but apart from these sort of pranks they stayed away. This is quite different from the reality of life for the indigenous people of the region where army harassment means intimidation, rape, physical assaults, detentions, torture and 'disappearing' people.

One of the reason the indigenous people voted to stage the conferences despite the enormous cost and effort they required (five centres and all the facilities from eating to sleeping structures had to be built) is that as well as the eventual promise of building an international struggle, the presence of 3,000 international visitors and the interest these people will take in the future welfare of their hosts places some limits on the repression the Mexican state can use against them. During the week of the conference for instance the army was forced to halt its daily patrols through the village of La Realidad, alongside one of the sites.

The communities that support the EZLN are made up of people almost completely descended from those who lived there before Columbus 'discovered' America. Most of the land was owned by feudal style landlords who claim to be of pure Spanish descent but in the area under rebellion the indigenous have taken over this land and much of it is worked under a traditional collective system.

Each community has weekly mass meetings at which it seems decisions on the running of that community are made and a mandated delegate attends the over-all civilian decision making structure, the CCGI. This body then issues orders to the army (EZLN) which seems to have a conventional military structure. For really large decisions like pulling out of the peace negotiations a community wide vote is held after weeks of discussion. It is unfortunate that more is not known about this process, in part due to the fact that they are conducted in one of the five local languages.

Neo-liberalism

This was the background against which the gathering took place. The EZLN had called it to discuss how the different struggles that are taking place around the world could support each other. The title of the conference, the 'Intercontinental Gathering for Humanity and against Neo-Liberalism' underlined the global scope of this project (neo-liberalism is the term used in Spanish and French speaking countries to describe the latest phase of capitalism). Those who came had been involved in many different local struggles from the strikes that paralysed France in December of last year to the Mothers of the Disappeared from Argentina.

The conference split into discussion groups around different aspects of neo-liberalism. At the end everyone came together in the one site for closing ceremonies and the reading back of the statements drawn up by each discussion group. Given the fact that this was the first time we had met and all the barriers of language and culture that existed between us all that could really happen was an exchange of experiences and ideas. The EZLN brought a declaration back to the final session which suggested that after the gathering had ended in Chiapas, people continued it in their own country by seeking to build networks of communications and solidarity between what struggles exist there.

A final decision that was made was to stage a second 'Intercontinental Gathering for Humanity and against neo-liberalism' in 1997 but this time in Europe. Planning has started for this with a European delegate meeting in Switzerland, and Italy looks like the most likely location. This second meeting is liable to be the real test of the idea behind the encounter, that is bringing together the many, many grassroots struggles that are taking place around the world. Whatever about the ultimate success or failure of this project it does represent a significant contribution to the idea that an alternative to capitalism is not only possible but is being constructed on a day to day basis by every struggle we take part in now.

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