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The Zapatistas: A New Strategy in Mexico

Anarchist analysis of the repercussions of the
news from Chiapas

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November 17, 2005

Retrieved on 8th August 2021 from anarkismo.net
From *Red & Black Revolution* 10 – 2005.

theanarchistlibrary.org

November 17, 2005

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have sat on their hands for the last 12 years waiting for the Zapatista rebellion to turn authoritarian to sit on their hands for the next dozen. The challenge of the Zapatista movement for anarchists has been how to have real solidarity with a movement that contains such ambiguities. And how to learn what there is to learn — and tell others — without becoming unthinking cheer leaders.

The global anti-capitalist movement

On the global level the significance of the rebellion in Chiapas has been the inspiration and organisational model it provided for new generations of anti-capitalist activists. Because of this the change in direction will have repercussions that stretch far beyond Mexico. The Zapatistas are also aware of this which is why the 6th declaration starts off by talking of forging a new relationship of respect and support with those struggling against neo-liberalism around the globe. This is to include sending aid — even to those in struggle Europe — although the communique makes clear that they are well aware that the relative poverty means this can only be symbolic.

But importantly it also announces the intention to organise a 3rd intercontinental encuentro at the end of this year or the start of the next. The previous two, held in Chiapas in 1996 and the Spanish state in 1997 played an important role in the emergence of the summit protest movement by bringing activists from around the globe into contact with each other. Those of us who met in Chiapas or Madrid would later meet on the streets of Seattle, Prague and Genoa. This encounter could help us take the next step.

part in this. The ACL had circulated a detailed discussion of the 6th declaration that questioned the aim of writing a new constitution. They pointed out not only that the fine words found in constitutions are frequently meaningless in reality but more importantly a constitution implied the existence of a government to implement it. In other words the state would continue to exist and the state is the negation of the social revolution.

Contradictions remain

So if the 6th declaration represents a very significant shift in Zapatista politics to anti-capitalism it also still contains many of the contradictions between their local organisational methods which are based on self-management and what they appear to advocate at the national level. The opposition to electoral politics has significantly hardened with the 6th declaration but still appears as a critique of all the existing electoral parties rather than of electoralism as a strategy in itself. The confusion between an anti-imperialist opposition to US domination and support for nationalism whether in Cuba, Mexico or Venezuela also remains.

How meaningful is it to talk of “*our leaders are destroying our nation*” because “*they are only concerned with the well being of capitalists*” when this is the natural order of capitalism, not just in Mexico now but throughout the world and throughout the history of the capitalist period. There have always been those on the left — including James Connolly in Ireland — who tried to redefine the nation so as to exclude the capitalist class. But are such semantic word games not simply building on sand — and facilitating the creation of a future ‘history’ where radical movements can be drained of their meaning by draping them in the national flag?

None of these criticisms are new but they will provide the excuse needed for those council communists and others who

Over the summer the Zapatistas surprised their supporters by suddenly declaring a Red Alert out of the blue. After a couple of days of near panic it emerged that this was just because they were undergoing a consulta (a discussion and referendum) which would decide on a new path for the movement. This new path is to once more turn outwards and to aim to build a new alliance across Mexico and beyond.

At the time I was drafting an article for Red and Black Revolution which looked at how the Zapatistas had been in a long inward looking phase which required many local compromises with the Mexican state. I was interested in the self-management structures they had built in this period but also the nature of the compromises and in particular the question of dual power. That is the question of how long a situation could exist where you had Zapatista structures of self-management on the one hand and the Mexico state on the other as opposed mechanisms that both tried to decide what life in Chiapas could be like.

The traditional leftist understanding is that situations of dual power cannot be indefinite — yet it appeared that the Zapatistas were attempting to do just this. Then the Red Alert and the communiques which followed made all my speculations irrelevant as they clearly brought this period to an end.

The years 2001–2004

The process by which the Zapatistas have spent most of the period from 2001 to mid 2005 building up self-management started when the Zapatistas realised they faced an all party coalition determined not to allow through the new indigenous laws contained in the San Andres peace accords. They date this to April 2001 when “*the politicians from the PRI, PAN and PRD approved a law that was no good, they killed dialogue once and*

for all, and they clearly stated that it did not matter what they had agreed to and signed, because they did not keep their word”.

After the usual long period of silence which indicates a lot of internal discussion the Zapatista’s announced that the Augascalantes where the big external meetings were once held were becoming Caracols or the centres of Zapatista internal organization as well as contact points with the Zapatistas for the outside world. These were to be the centres of the Juntas of Good Government (although in English junta is often assumed to mean dictatorship in fact it means something like council).

What exactly this meant was not all that clear until on the 15th of August 2004 the EZLN released a set of 8 communiques, most of which fleshed out in a huge amount of detail just what the Zapatistas were up to in this period. In many ways these are among the most important documents of the rebellion and it is worth taking the time to read them in detail.

Self-management in Chiapas

From these documents we learn that the “good government juntas” follow the libertarian structures established by the other layers of Zapatista self-management. By far the most provoking aspect is that the actual people who make up each junta are rotated in an incredibly rapid fashion. According to Marcos these rotations are from every “eight to 15 days (according to the region)”. The delegates are themselves drawn from the members of the Autonomous Council (AC) and because these are rotated in turn (over a longer period which seems to be a year) this means that by the time everyone on an AC has been on the junta a new AC is created and so all these new people must in turn learn the ropes.

As might be imagined this is driving those who work with the Zapatistas nuts because it means every time you go to a ‘good government junta’ you are dealing with different people.

Learning from struggle

This question is addressed in another long communique released in the weeks after the 6th declaration called ‘A Penguin in the Selva Lacandona’. Much of this is taken up with the story about the Penguin and dealing with criticisms from Mexican social democrats but a long section also asked the reader to imagine the influence of the rebellion, and everything that went with it, on the children who have grown up during it. “*What happens with that girl- then-adolescent-then-young-woman after having seen and heard “the civil societies” for 12 years, bringing not only projects, but also histories and experiences from diverse parts of Mexico and the World?” “We told you in the Sixth Declaration that new generations have entered into the struggle. And they are not only new, they also have other experiences, other histories. We did not tell you in the Sixth, but I’m telling you now: they are better than us, the ones who started the EZLN and began the uprising. They see further, their step is more firm, they are more open, they are better prepared, they are more intelligent, more determined, more aware.*

What the Sixth presents is not an “imported” product, written by a group of wise men in a sterile laboratory and then introduced into a social group. The Sixth comes out of what we are now and of where we are.”

The suggestion clearly is that the process of rebellion and solidarity shown with the rebellion has been a political education for all those growing up during it. And that this is why the Zapatistas have moved towards a more explicit anti-capitalist position. Only time can reveal the accuracy of this claim but there is no reason for dismissing it out of hand.

At the time of writing the work to build the ‘National Campaign with Another Politics’ is well underway with the first of a series of meetings, the one for ‘Political Organisations of the Left’ having just taken place. The Mexican anarchist groups, including ‘Alianza de los Comunistas Libertarios’, were taking

- *Yes to reciprocal respect for the autonomy and independence of organisations, for their methods of struggle, for their ways of organising, for their internal decision making processes, for their legitimate representations.*
- *And yes to a clear commitment for joint and coordinated defense of national sovereignty, with intransigent opposition to privatisation attempts of electricity, oil, water and natural resources.”*

The declaration also makes it clear that the EZLN is not talking about a return to armed struggle but “*a struggle in order to demand that we make a new Constitution, new laws which take into account the demands of the Mexican people, which are: housing, land, work, food, health, education, information, culture, independence, democracy, justice, liberty and peace. A new Constitution which recognises the rights and liberties of the people, and which defends the weak in the face of the powerful.*”

In all this the 6th declaration does not represent a return to the strategy of the 1994–2001 period — a strategy which limited itself to democratic demands and the opening up of a political space. This strategy meant that while the practical organisation of the Zapatistas was a useful model for anarchists of self-management in practice, their actual declared goals always seemed quite naive — a demand for a nicer capitalism in an age when neoliberalism ensured any such experiments would be isolated and impoverished.

So it can be seen that the 6th declaration represents quite a step forward in the political program advocated by the Zapatistas. But why or how did these changes occur. Is this merely the old core leadership of leftists that went into the mountains in the 1980’s shifting a step along the path they always intended to follow. Or does it reflect a genuine development of analysis at the base of the movement. Or more realistically a transformation at the base driven by the old leftists?

This is by design and it is worth quoting Marcos at length as to why this is so

“If this is analysed in depth, it will be seen that it is a process where entire villages are learning to govern.

“The advantages? Fine, one of them is that it’s more difficult for an authority to go too far and, by arguing how “complicated” the task of governing is, to not keep the communities informed about the use of resources or decision making. The more people who know what it’s all about, the more difficult it will be to deceive and to lie. And the governed will exercise more vigilance over those who govern.

“It also makes corruption more difficult. If you manage to corrupt one member of the JBG, you will have to corrupt all the autonomous authorities, or all the rotations, because doing a “deal” with just one of them won’t guarantee anything (corruption also requires “continuity”). Just when you have corrupted all the councils, you’ll have to start over again, because by then there will have been a change in the authorities, and the one you “arranged” won’t work any longer. And so you’ll have to corrupt virtually all the adult residents of the Zapatista communities. Although, obviously, it’s likely that once you’ve achieved that, the children will have already grown up and then, once again”

I think the logic here is quite recognisable to anarchists and needs no further explanation. The August 2004 communique also explored the limitations of what had been achieved — notably the failure to involve women as equals in the decision making structures at the base of the organisation and the tendency of the military side of the organisation to try and make decisions for the communities.

The new turn of 2005

The new turn of the Zapatistas makes no significant difference to the basics of the self-management structure sketched above. The communiqués which announced it did add more details to what had been happening and the steps taken to address some of the problems identified.

But fundamentally they recognised that *“we have reached a point where we cannot go any further, and, in addition, it is possible that we could lose everything we have if we remain as we are and do nothing more in order to move forward. The hour has come to take a risk once again and to take a step which is dangerous but which is worthwhile.”*

The 6th Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle is interesting because it also sees the Zapatistas publically put forward an explicit and general anti-capitalist line for the first time. Previously there was an anti-capitalist logic underlying their opposition to neo-liberalism but here for the first time they distinguish between neoliberalism simply being a bad phase of capitalism and capitalism in itself being bad.

The section ‘How we see the world’ includes a long section on how capitalism works *“capitalism means that there are a few who have great wealth, but they did not win a prize, or find a treasure, or inherit from a parent. They obtained that wealth, rather, by exploiting the work of the many. So capitalism is based on the exploitation of the workers, which means they exploit the workers and take out all the profits they can. This is done unjustly, because they do not pay the worker what his work is worth. Instead they give him a salary that barely allows him to eat a little and to rest for a bit, and the next day he goes back to work in exploitation, whether in the countryside or in the cities”*.

Alliance with the left

This sets the basis for an unacknowledged change in who the EZLN are seeking an alliance with. In the past this was all progressive forces (‘civil society’), now it is *“with persons and organisations just of the left”*. Previously outside of Chiapas the EZLN appeared to advocate that the first step was a democratic (but capitalist) state and that the struggle for this included ‘progressive’ sections of Mexican business in the fight for democratic reform.

Now the declaration says *“we are going to go about building, ... a national program of struggle, but a program which will be clearly of the left, or anti-capitalist, or anti-neoliberal, or for justice, democracy and liberty for the Mexican people”*. In concrete form *“the EZLN will establish a policy of alliances with non-electoral organizations and movements which define themselves, in theory and practice, as being of the left, in accordance with the following conditions:*

- *Not to make agreements from above to be imposed below, but to make accords to go together to listen and to organise outrage.*
- *Not to raise movements which are later negotiated behind the backs of those who made them, but to always take into account the opinions of those participating.*
- *Not to seek gifts, positions, advantages, public positions, from the Power or those who aspire to it, but to go beyond the election calendar.*
- *Not to try to resolve from above the problems of our nation, but to build FROM BELOW AND FOR BELOW an alternative to neoliberal destruction, an alternative of the left for Mexico.*