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Zapatistas: An Inspirational Decade On

Andrew Flood

March 30, 2005

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January 1st marked the 11th anniversary of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, a state in southern Mexico. On New Years Day 1994, the EZLN seized a number of towns in Chiapas before re-treating into the mountains and jungles in the face of a massive army counter attack. The military phase of the struggle lasted only a few days as millions of Mexicans demonstrated to demand that the army stop their offensive against the rebels.

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When you explain the anarchist vision to people a very common response is that it is a nice idea but it could never work. People see all the difficulties of their day-to-day lives and doubt that these could be overcome to create a free society. But the Zapatista movement, despite the fact that it is divided into five different languages and almost exclusively consists of very poor farmers, has managed not only to create an alternative but to keep that alternative alive for over a decade.

These rebel communities do not elect leaders to make decisions for them. Instead, decisions are made, whether on a local level or across the region, through a system of mandated and recallable delegates. Last year they set up five 'good government councils'. Delegates on these are rotated every eight to fifteen days to prevent anyone getting too attached to the position and as part of "a process where entire villages are learning to govern." In a letter released over the summer the Zapatista spokesperson explained why they choose such a system

"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 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 good government council, 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."

A very different way of running things than what you find in Ireland where, both in politics and in the economy, many important decisions that affect our society are made by professional politicians and the business elite.

Of course surviving for 11 years has meant the Zapatistas have had to make many compromises. Their initial rising was premised on the idea that either their action would spark a general uprising in Mexico or that they would be crushed. And despite much effort in the years after that rising they failed to spark off a revolutionary movement across Mexico. This means they have shifted focus to building an autonomous area in Chiapas, still part of the Mexican nation but without any involvement of the Mexican government.

Today in Chiapas they have had to move away from confrontation with the state and eliminate problems which might invite state involvement. So, although the Zapatista communities still occupy the land seized from the ranchers in the years after the rising and maintain autonomous communities they still have to deal with the reality of Mexican state power and abide by some of their regulations — like holding a valid Mexican driving license. A further example of this sort of pragmatic compromise is that the Zapatistas have decided they will allow the national elections to take place in their communities even if they will not be voting in them.

It is hard to see how much longer the Zapatista experiment in self-managed communities will survive. They reckon they have some space for now because the government expects them to fail and is happy, for now, to wait for them to do so. But their existence does demonstrate that a couple of hundred thousand people can organise their lives in a genuinely democratic fashion, in the harshest of conditions, for over a decade.