

The EZLN

What do they stand for?

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The name of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) rebels is taken from the Emiliano Zapata who played a major role in the Mexican Revolution {1910 – 1921}. 73 years has passed since the Mexican Revolution . The memory of Zapata had faded onto the worn pages of history.

Indeed the heirs of the betrayers of Zapata, headed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party and President Carlos Sallinas, are in power today in Mexico. They have remained in power for the last 75 years. But the Zapatistas have come back to haunt them.

A New Year a New Dawn.

On New Years Day of 1994 people awoke to the news that four towns in the south-eastern state of Chiapas had been taken over by a group calling itself the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Militarily they had timed their strike against the Mexican army well and thus even managed to capture General Abslon Castellanos (former Chiapas Governor). Initially they took San Cristobal de Las Casas then Oxchuc a town 36km away. They ransacked 10 government offices. They freed 179 prisoners from the prison in San Cristobal and attacked the army garrison on January 2nd.

They stated:

“We have nothing to lose, absolutely nothing, no decent roof over our heads, no land, no work, poor health, no food, no education, no right to freely and democratically choose our leaders, no independence from foreign interests, and no justice for ourselves or our children. But we say enough is enough! We are the descendants of those who truly built this nation, we are millions of dispossessed, and we call upon all our brethren to join our crusade, the only option to avoid dying of starvation!”

On January 4th the big guns hit back. Ten towns in the surrounding area of San Cristobal were bombed. Reports came in of at least 400 killed in the bombing. Five reported EZLN rebels were found dead in Ocosingo. In another town, the Zapatistas shot down a helicopter, burned down the city hall and then left. The bodies of 38 people who had been killed by the federal army were found. The next day 70 tanks arrived in the conflict zone and the army attacked a van killing 5 civilians including one 8 year old girl. Various government ministries circulated black propaganda about the group labelling them radical with a professional foreign leadership. The authorities also stated that the presence of human rights organisations *“hinders the dismantling of such a movement.”*

Why Chiapas ?

The EZLN is based amongst the indigenous people who live in and around the jungle of Lacandona, east of the high plains of Chiapas. Chiapas is an atrociously poor area. 41% of the population have no running water. 34.9% are without electricity. 63% of the people live in accommodation of only one room. 19% of the labour force has no possible income and 67% of the labour force live on or below the minimum wage — in Mexico you can take this as being very little. Despite

Article 27¹ which promises Land Reform in the constitution nothing has happened in this area. President Sallinas recently changed Article 27 further wiping out any hopes for agrarian reform. Northern Mexico has developed factories to cater for companies making use of cheap labour. The southern part of Mexico has been left to become a wilderness. The EZLN fears that NAFTA² (North American Free Trade Agreement) will keep Chiapas further isolated and underdeveloped.

After the first initial days of hostilities the EZLN withdrew to the Lacandona jungle where they now are involved in negotiations. A cease-fire which began on January 17th has held despite the army breaking on a number of occasions. In February negotiations took place inside a belt composing of representatives from the NGO's (³ non-governmental agencies). Invitations were issued to the various political parties asking them to participate in the peace talks. No weapons have been handed over to the Mexican army.

The State adopted a more conciliatory approach after the international condemnation of the bombing raid on January 5th. The move towards negotiation seems only to have come about due to the light of international attention, as prior to this Mexico's record in human rights is a diabolical one.

“Torture was frequently used by law-enforcement agents particularly the state and judicial police, throughout Mexico. Most victims were criminal suspects but some including leaders of indigenous communities and human rights activists were apparently targeted solely for their peaceful political activities”⁴

As of February '94 the Secretariat of Human rights of the main opposition party – Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD) – reported that 263 of their members, activists and supporters have been assassinated since the 1988 electoral campaign.

The EZLN rejected a request to drop political points from the agenda saying that they were not going to force national agreements but that as Mexicans they had *“a right to form opinions and to protest about aspects of Mexico's political life.”* In this letter they go on to say that *“Peace without respect and dignity continues to be, for us, an undeclared war of the powerful against our people.”* They then went on to show their willingness for 'peace with dignity' by withdrawing from certain towns and letting the International Red Cross move in and take control declaring them 'grey areas'. They also said that they would allow free passage of civilians while maintaining mobile patrols to ensure no military, police, or government officials entered the 'grey zones'.

In another statement issued to national newspapers the EZLN asked *“Why is everyone so quiet? Is this the 'democracy' you wanted? Complicity with lies?”* Going on to say *“How much blood must be spilt before they (PRI) understand that we want respect not charity?”* The statement finishes with the important lines

“The CCRI-CG (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee General Command) of the EZLN will go to the negotiating table with reservation because of its lack of

¹ Article 27 in the Mexican Constitution is the one which promised agrarian reform. It was included in the constitution after the revolution and was always seen as the guarantee of similar land reforms as those Zapata implemented in his own region of Morelos during the revolution.

² NAFTA will also drive down the prices paid for some of the basic crops produced by the indigenios people for their crops. The timing of the uprising was to coincide with the first day that NAFTA was supposed to take effect in Mexico.

³ Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) are groups such as the Red Cross, Amnesty International, etc.

⁴ Quoted from an Amnesty International Report.

confidence of the federal government. They want to buy us with a ton of promises. They want us to sell the only thing we have left : dignity. The 1st of January was not enough for the government to learn to speak to its citizens as equals. It seems that more than January 1 are necessary.....Here Zapata lives. Try to assassinate him again. Our blood is a pledge. That it be taken by he who is still ashamed.”

They also issued a communiqué to all the NGO’s operating within the conflict zone saying that they continued to “*respect and welcome their neutrality and humanitarian efforts.*”

The month of February and March is littered with accounts of the spreading popularity of the EZLN. There was a march of 300kms by nearly 200 indigenous people to the outskirts of Mexico city. Banners displayed read “*This dialogue we don’t understand* “ which was a reference to the massacre of students in 1968 and the more recent one in Chiapas. A demonstration for agrarian reform in Oaxaca was attacked by police. Students calling themselves ‘Zapatistas’ protested at a stop by the presidential candidate of the PRI. In Puebla local indigenous groups blocked the highway. In Tamaulipas dissident oil workers at the state petro-chemical industry (PIMEX) broke with their unions and organised strikes, blockades and demonstrations at the plants. Unarmed Indians have staged land take-overs in the state of Chiapas – throughout the Mayan Highlands. There are reports that over 120,000 hectares of land has been expropriated from large private land owners⁵. On April 10th, 77 years after the death of Emiliano Zapata large demonstrations were organised and took place in support of EZLN demands in Mexico city. In June the EZLN rejected a peace offer set forth by the Government.

Declaration of the Jungle issued by the EZLN

“We call upon Article 39 of the Mexican Constitution which states ‘the people have at all times the inalienable right to alter or change the nature of their government.’ Therefore in accordance with our Constitution, we issue this DECLARATION OF WAR... People of Mexico, we call for your total participation in this struggle for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace.”

Where are they coming from ?

“We are not Marxists, nor are we guerrillas. We are Zapatistas and we are an army.”
EZLN Major

The first days of 1994 saw the resurgence of the name of Zapata on the airwaves of the world. The EZLN, are only the most public face of the Chiapas conflict. The EZLN act as an army, under the direction of a larger organisation, the CRIC-GC . The CRIC-GC is comprised of delegates from many indigenous communities and it is they who are responsible for the politics and organisation of the EZLN. The CRIC-GC is the highest authority of the movement. The EZLN is subservient to them and exists to carry out their wishes.

Major Benjamin of the EZLN says

⁵ Source Peter Martin Morelost who attended the National Democratic Convention and posted his report onto the internet.. (24.9.94 Mexico’s National Democratic Convention.)

*“We are not Maoists or Marxists, sir. We are a group of campesinos, workers and students for whom the government has left no other path than arms to resolve our ancestral problems”.*⁶

To understand what being a Zapatista means one has to go back to the origins of today's EZLN. In 1983 twelve young people entered Chiapas to organise the oppressed population. A vital lesson taught to these young people was that of democratic organisation. Sub Commandante Marcos revealed *“The Zapatista army was not born democratic, it was born as a political military organisation. But as it grew the organisational methods of the communities began to permeate and dominate our movement, to the degree that the leadership of the EZLN has become democratic in the indigenous manner.”*

The CRIC-GC is organised through a delegate based democracy. It is composed of delegates from each town and community. It is responsible for the politics and organisation of the EZLN and is its highest authority. The decision to take up armed struggle came first and the CRIC-GC grew from this decision.

*“So we decided that there is no way other than to organise and rise up like this in armed struggle. So we began to organise ourselves like that, secretly, in a revolutionary organisation. But, as it advanced, each people 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. So first, someone from each people has been named responsible. In that way we advanced town by town, so that there was time, then to name delegates. In that way we came to be the CCRI.”*⁷ Sub commander Marcos is answerable to the CRIC-GC but remains the leader when it comes to military matters.

The delegate based democracy on which the CRIC-GC is based is best explained by a young Zapatista Isaac *“if some member of the CCRI does not do their work, if they do not respect the people, well compa it is not your place to be there. Then, well excuse us but we will have to put another in your place.”* This is how the community understand democracy and it is easy to see why they see no relation to what the ‘democracy’ the PRI currently exercise in Mexico.

The conditions these people find themselves in are harsh yet they can still operate a form of participatory democracy. This disproves the lie put forth by Leninists that in difficult conditions a dictatorship over the people must take place in ‘their interests’. It comes as no surprise that the Zapatistas repeatedly deny being Marxists or Leninists as these forms of political ideology have difficulty with the idea of participatory democracy.

Through this democratic process the EZLN developed politics on a wide range of issues. For example the Women’s revolutionary law supports the right of women to participate fully in the revolutionary struggle, control their own fertility, choose partners, and has regard to their health, education, and well being. This signifies a major advancement for women of the indigenous population. The peace proposal offered by the government was rejected by 97% of the people in the Zapatista controlled areas after consultation took place with all those over the age of 12.

In the negotiations with the Government, the EZLN put forward ten conditions which had to be met before a peace could be agreed. Many of these points for example the dissolution of the present government to be replaced by a transitional one until proper elections, were obviously not going to be met by the PRI. Also the EZLN demanded that NAFTA be revised. Within the core of Zapatista politics there seems to be an inherent flaw. On one hand they know that their

⁶ Quoted from early newspaper coverage of events – listed in Chapter 2 – The first days.

⁷ Quoted from interview with Javier of the CCRI 3/2/94 in La Jornada.

demands will not be met by the authorities yet on the other hand, given this, the demands they make are watered down versions of their own political line. The question is when the Zapatistas were preparing their 10 point peace plan, what was their political strategy? Assuming that they knew the government would reject most of their points why didn't they include a fuller expression of their program. Perhaps they did have illusions in the government granting some of their demands, perhaps they felt that anything more radical would alienate the rest of the Mexican people, we don't know! These questions remain unanswered.

They claim to have learned from the guerrilla movements in Latin America. Firstly, to greatly distrust the surrender of arms, and secondly not have confidence "*only in the electoral systems*"⁸. Yet this position seems to be contradicted by Marcos who refers to the creation of a "*democratic space where the political parties, or groups that aren't parties, can air and discuss their social proposals.*"⁹ The point is explained further in a communiqué by the CCRI-CG in June where it says "*...this revolution will not end in a new class, faction of a class, or group in power. It will end in a free and democratic space for political struggle.*" The EZLN are fighting a revolution for democratic space? Yet, the type of democracy which they wish is not tolerated in any Western society and is unlikely to be permitted in Mexico unless revolution spreads throughout the country.

While it is obvious that no such space exists in Mexico, even the creation of some form of social democracy will not bring about the changes which the Zapatistas so desperately need. Social democracy does not provide liberty or justice. This call for social democracy contrasts with the beliefs which Marcos says exist amongst the people that "*they (politicians) are changing the leaves of the trees, but the roots are damaged... We say Let's uproot the tree and plant it again.*" The tree will not be uprooted though the creation of social democracy.

However the options for the EZLN seem limited. Prior to the Presidential Elections in August they organised a National Democratic Convention (CND) which took place in the Lacandona jungle. This logistical miracle was attended by over 7,000 people¹⁰. The conference was attended by many of the established voices of opposition to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Marcos said he wished to turn the CND into the leaders of civil society and that it should be they who decided how to respond to the PRI and the fraudulent State. Marcos presented democratic change as something which should come via peaceful means. The military solution would be adopted solely as a matter of last recourse¹¹ and only be tried when the CND decided upon it. Two weeks later the PRI presidential candidate went on to win the election amongst accusations of fraud. The creation of a democratic space through peaceful means to appear to have failed.

Mexico still needs to build a strong revolutionary movement. It will require greater numbers than the revolutionaries of the EZLN to destroy the rotten Mexican state. This difficult task, facing all the people who wish for change in Mexico, is made more difficult because of its dominant neighbour, the USA.

Within the EZLN, it seems, there is a widespread belief that their demands can only be met when as they say "*the tree is uprooted.*" They have developed a democratic structure from which ideas can flow and develop. They have struck out against the system which causes them so much death, pain and suffering. Support work has been done by the anarchist group 'Love and Rage' who have members in the USA and in Mexico. They have sent people down to Chiapas to ascertain

⁸ Quoted from interview with Subcommander Marcos in La Jornada 4.2.94 – 7.2.94

⁹ Interview with Marcos 11 May '94

¹⁰ Attendance figure quoted from report by Peter Martin Morales.

¹¹ Peter Martin Morales

the facts, organised translations of EZLN communiqués and helped in the production of a book on the EZLN. Here in Ireland we in the WSM have held a picket on the Mexican Embassy and handed in a letter of protest. This type of work though it may seem at first to be of minor importance, in fact ensures that the Mexican government knows that their actions are being monitored thus decreasing the likelihood of a government crackdown in the area.

The task facing Mexican revolutionaries is to spread their struggle and will for change to the cities and to the north of the Country. Although Marcos and the CCRI-GC are emphasising the role of the media, it is more important for the EZLN activists to win support on the ground.

In the United States activists must work on raising awareness of the EZLN amongst the resident Latino population. Pickets can be organised. Any struggle that remains isolated will face certain annihilation. It is the responsibility of all revolutionaries to ensure this will not happen.

The job of anarchists in Mexico is to spread their ideas and to share their experience as revolutionaries with the people of Chiapas. The Zapatistas have already rejected the ideas of the authoritarian left. The demands of the EZLN for liberty, justice, and democracy will not be realised under capitalism. These demands have never arisen out of reform of any system in any country. Mexican anarchists should utilise the fertile ground that now exists for anarchist ideas in Chiapas.

What has happened in Chiapas is encouraging and needs to be supported. The revolutionaries of the EZLN, however, have not stumbled onto something new. The basic principle of participatory democracy is one of the foundation stones of anarchism. The EZLN deserve praise for the way they have integrated democracy into their struggle against the state. Now in Mexico where history stopped with the usurpation of power by the PRI seventy-five years ago, the people are still struggling towards having control over their own lives and destinies. True democracy needs to be established and implemented as part of the process of destroying the oppressive state which keeps all of us chained.

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