

Echos of the struggle in Mexico

Interview with Raul of radio Ke Huelga

Guillaume Goutte

21st April 2011

Guillaume: Could you quickly introduce yourself to our readers?

Raul: My name is Raul. I am Mexican and I am passing through Paris. I work at a free radio station [radio libre] called Ke Huelga [What a strike!]. The station was born out of the student strikes in 1999. Since then we have been broadcasting on FM and the internet. I also work at the national university.

Guillaume: Can you tell us a little more about the Ke Huelga station? You said it was born out of a movement of strikes, what was the original idea? Why a free radio station?

Raul: Just as here, perhaps even more so than here, the big media networks, the “commercial networks” as they are called, are a closed monopoly that hardly ever covers social struggles, and if they do it is to make them appear criminal. So, when the strike started, the media networks crucified them by saying that it was just a bunch of layabouts and non-students who wanted to highjack the university for their own interests that had nothing to do with education. You see, it was a really nasty and dishonest campaign against the student strike. So, during the first days of the strike a group of engineers decided to set up a radio broadcast on the FM signal to create a space where different opinions could be expressed and above all to spread the voice of the strike’s general assembly so that people could know about its initiatives and decisions.

Guillaume: How is the station organised and run?

Raul: Ah, that is really interesting. We are a generation that was born out of political activity with or after the Zapatista movement [zapatisme]. So, the first thing we said to ourselves was that we did not want the authorisation or permission of the state. You see, it is a federal offence in Mexico to broadcast without legal authorisation. There are some people who have been taken to court and received heavy sentences for it: two years in prison and a fine of 50, 000 pesos [around 2500 euros]. But, we, as a point of principle, did not want the state’s permission to broadcast. Just like the indian movement we felt that we didn’t need permission to be free, to express ourselves. So, we seized our freedom and we worked at it, like we would the soil.

The other interesting aspect about this project is organising by assembly. There are no permanent positions because we tried to eliminate the presence of money from the heart of the station. Each individual, collective or group who participates in the station has to learn to work and run all of the station’s equipment. You have to know how to do everything. It’s an aspect of self-management to which we are strongly attached and which we argue is the way to change how

we communicate with people. We have a general assembly that decides on the most important matters about the station: if we have to change subjects, make adjustments in the program etc.

Another important aspect of the station: be open to people who are struggling. It is in this way that the station has grown and how it has managed to maintain itself: through inviting people who are struggling to come and speak on the station and, from time to time, to take a space, long or short, to talk about their struggles. At times, we have also “lent” our radio. For example, for the Appo struggle [Popular assembly of the people of Oaxaca], we linked up, that is to say we picked up their signal and retransmitted it to the whole of Mexico. But even though we are open, this is not the case vis-à-vis political parties. We refuse to speak about elections or do propaganda for this or that candidate. There are also certain rules of behaviour: no homophobic, misogynist or racist remarks. Neither do we praise violence.

Finally, we have no sponsors. We do not broadcast advertisements. This is a really rare thing in Mexico where all of the stations are interrupted every three or four minutes by advertising! We get our money from donations, often anonymous. We also have an unusual approach to technical apparatus: we do not buy transmitters, instead we try to make them ourselves, like we did during the strike. We know how to do it and we have learnt to master the technology.

Guillaume: What kind of programs do you broadcast on Ke Huelga?

Raul: We have three types of programs. There are programmes that comprise a sort of ‘review’ with a space for news, music, an agenda for militants, discussion and debate. This is the most common sort of program we do. Also, we have collective and individual programs that are more musical: hardcore, rap, reggae, music from the Balkans, etc. Often you can’t hear this kind of music elsewhere in the country. And apart from these types of programs, we have projects on pressing subjects, like the environment for example. Other than this, I take part in a radio journal. We do it every four days and it is broadcast every morning at eight o’clock and around ten o’clock in the evening. We call it: ‘Communicate the resistance’. This means that we do not talk about the national political news, but rather we speak about struggles against capitalism, in favour of the workers, etc.

Guillaume: How popular is the radio station?

Raul: That is the existential question! As for myself, I am an optimist. I get the impression that there are a great number of people who listen to the station, thousands, maybe tens of thousands. After two years of continuous broadcasting it has become something of a social phenomenon. Sometimes, when I am on the bus or in the metro, I hear people talking about the radio station. There was one person who said: “You know, those guys on Ke Huelga, they are idiots, they’ll say anything, they are against everything, they don’t like anything and they have nothing to propose”. But there are others who say “No, it is fantastic, there is no advertising! You can hear music there that you can’t hear anywhere else!” We also receive more and more messages from people on the answering machine that shows there are a lot of people who listen to the station. But it also the effect of broadcasting: people who are struggling know that Ke Huelga can help them get their message out there. Moreover, because of the level of suppression, there are very few free radios on the FM signal. There are only three in fact.

Guillaume: What is the level of suppression precisely? Have you had problems? What forms did they take?

Raul: It is illegal to run a free radio station in Mexico. The State knows where we are and who we are, there is video surveillance at the university where the studio is. We think that there must be a degree of tolerance towards the station, particularly because we don’t do any advertising.

What most annoys the owners of the commercial radio station is the fact that other radio stations do advertising without paying tax and without permission. The other reason for this tolerance is that we are based in the university. If the state were to send the police to arrest the team this would be a national scandal. But the State puts a spoke in our wheels all the same, especially with interference. In the past twelve years of our existence it has happened to us five or seven times: they emit a signal powerful enough to jam our signal. It is usually this sort of suppression. But we are on our guard. Especially since the government of Calderon changed the law to harden punishments against free radio and pirate radio (radio stations that broadcast advertising without permission, which receive money for adverts but don't pay tax [very different from free radio]). The government uses a new law: if you broadcast without the permission of the state, they say you are damaging national property. You risk two years in prison and a 50,000 pesos fine, which is really expensive for us. We have friends from other stations who have already gone to court for this reason. No one has been sentenced yet but it's on course. Otherwise, there have also been attacks against other radio stations. In these cases the police and the military turn up and surrounded the station. There have been dozens of cases like that. After the raid, the radio stations continue to broadcast but they have to buy back all of their equipment, etc. But for the moment, if I am not mistaken, no one has yet gone to prison for it.

Guillaume: Changing the subject. Where is the Zapatista movement today in 2011? What are its strong points, its limitations, what is it up against etc. How has it evolved since 1994?

Raul: I think that the Zapatista movement has a nearly exclusive virtue: the fact of having developed the experience of self-management in a territory, on a regional level. Today, there is a large region that is "governed" by what we call "councils of good government", so organised that these governments do not become another power over people and which, on the contrary, people themselves can govern their own affairs. The communities name their representatives who name their municipal councillors who, once brought together, set up juntas [councils of good government].

There is also the accompanying presence of the Zapatista army [EZLN, the Zapatist army of National Liberation]. It has to be said that without the Zapatist army this experiment could not have happened: it represents an important armed defence. I think the federal army takes seriously the fact that the Zapatistas are armed and that they will not hesitate to respond to any aggression. I think that it is because of this fact that the Zapatista movement continues to be alive and active. But it also faces a very, very strong counter-insurreccional offensive. It is the most pointed and hard operation against the population in Mexico. There is a veritable military encirclement: thousands of soldiers are stationed around Zapatist communities. The army has also encircled the forest [where the Zapatistas are to be found] by building roads and runways for planes, which helps to establish an even more effective encirclement. Apparently the large forest is difficult to access; the army can only send troops by plane, which is a pretty delicate operation. Today, [thanks to the roads] we often see military convoys going by.

In different regions, the government has also encouraged confrontations between zapatist and non-zapatist communities. It is a strategy in which both the federal and the Chiapas governments have invested a lot of money. For example, in the case of raising livestock: they give a non-zapatist community some livestock, and this community, in order to feed these animals, puts pressure on the zapatist communities in the region to change how the land is used: they ask that part of the land stop being used to grow corn and to cultivate other food stuffs so that they can use it for their livestock. And this creates tensions.

The government also uses paramilitary groups. In Mixiton, near San Cristobal de las Casas, there is the Army of God, a paramilitary group that makes life impossible for the inhabitants of Mixiton, which sympathises with the Zapatist army and the adherents of the Other Campaign. For example, they kidnapped some people, they violently beat them and, after, they threatened to burn them alive: they poured petrol on them. Fine, they escaped okay, they weren't killed, but even so ... Throughout the Chiapas you find these groups encouraged by the government that have an increasingly aggressive attitude towards those people close to the Zapatist army and the Other Campaign.

Development initiatives are another aspect of the government's counter-insurrection, especially those to do with agro-carbons: the Chiapas government has favoured investment in the production of agro-carbons. But again, this is another pressure on the land because to make these plantations they need the land that people use to grow food. Lastly, there is another position taken by the government, notably with regards to schools. For centuries there have been no schools in the Chiapas and it was the Zapatistas who began to build them in communities. But now as part of its counter-insurrectional strategy, the government has created official schools, right next to the zapatist ones, and stated that it will not recognise diplomas obtained nor courses taken in the zapatist schools. This is designed to force people to leave them. They even give students scholarships.

There has therefore been an historical change in the attitude of the state towards these communities. And the Zapatistas have to have face this. But I think that the Zapatistas are, at this very moment, repositioning themselves. They are saying that there will be some important mobilization in the next few months, but we don't know any more than that. But it is felt that the Zapatist movement will remobilize the masses again. But its not certain, its only a feeling.

Guillaume: On this subject, does the Zapatist movement still enjoy a great deal of popular support?

Raul: No, not at all, I think that has changed a lot. There was a very tough political attempt to cash in on the confrontation between Marcos and the social-democratic candidate in 2006 [Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD)]. There are a lot of people who distanced themselves from the Zapatistas because of this confrontation, which, in my opinion, sometimes went too far. He didn't need to be so belligerent. But, on the other side, I think that the media played an important role in exaggerating the confrontation. For example, Marcos declared that he was openly against all three candidates of the three big parties in Mexico. But the press only reported on Marcos' attacks against López Obrador even though he was speaking about all three. A lot of intellectuals have also distanced themselves because they do not think that the Zapatist movement is a viable project. Moreover, the Zapatist movement has no presence in the media. And those who write say everything and nothing about it.

Further, the López Obrador movement has a strong popular base. In the shantytowns, in the lower middle class, among the elderly, there are loads of people who support López Obrador, not due to any political calculation but out of a profound emotional and cultural issue. These people took a dim view of Marcos' attitude towards López Obrador.

Apart from that, there is something I find quite positive: after the return of Marcos to the Chiapas when he left the media and political scene, the Other Campaign succeeded in undertaking many initiatives and consolidating a relatively heterogeneous circle of influence, which has shown itself since as a protagonist which matters and acts. And this is not a circle of influence for seizing power but rather for bringing struggles together and for learning how to struggle

together. For example, for prisoners, we have succeeded in launching important campaigns for their liberty: exposures, road blockades, protests, etc. And that is something which didn't exist before. Everything had to be approved of by the parties, by the politicians or the intellectuals. For the first time in the history of the country, there is an autonomous political movement, small but militant and with a common general orientation. At the same time, it has to be said that there are problems of political sectarianism within the Other Campaign, people who cannot stand each other, etc. But they manage to work in the same direction, each on their side. Instead of doing a single political act, we do two, but we do it. There are hundreds of collectives in all countries doing things in the same direction, and that I find very positive.

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Retrieved on 2nd September 2021 from libcom.org
Original interview by Guillaume Goutte, 21st April 2011, in *Le Monde Libertaire* no. 1635 pp.
14–16. *Translated by Isidore Malva.*

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