

The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle in the New World Order

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February 14, 1994

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“If you have come here to help me, You are wasting your time ... But if you have come because Your liberation is bound up with mine, Then let us work together.” — Aboriginal Woman

Is the armed uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in the Mexican state of Chiapas just another protest by the wretched of the earth in a 500 year history of resistance? Is it just another foredoomed repetition of earlier, failed Leninist attempts to organize the peasantry to join the party and smash the state? Or, are there things about the uprising which are going to have profound effects and can teach us something about how to struggle in the present period? The answer, I think, is that the actions of Mayan Indians in Chiapas and the way they have circulated in Mexico, to North America and around the world do indeed have some vital lessons for all of us.

The Electronic Fabric of Struggle

The most striking thing about the sequence of events set in motion on January 1, 1994 has been the speed with which news of the struggle circulated and the rapidity of the mobilization of support which resulted. In the first instance, from the very first day the EZLN has been able to effectively publicize its actions through the faxing of its declarations, and subsequent communiques, directly to a wide variety of news media. In the second instance, the circulation of its actions and demands through the mass media (effective because they were totally unexpected and on enough of a scale to constitute “news”) has been complemented and reinforced by a spontaneous and equally rapid diffusion of its demands and reports on its actions through computer communication networks which connect vast numbers of people interested in events there both inside and outside of Mexico.

This diffusion, which flashed into conferences and lists on networks such as Peacenet (e.g., carnet.mexnews), the Internet (e.g., Mexico-L, Native-L, Centam-L) and Usenet (e.g., soc.culture.Mexican, soc.culture.Latin-American), was then collected, sorted, compiled and sometimes synthesized and rediffused by particularly interested parties in the nets. For example, the Latin American Data Base at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque began to issue a regular compendium of Chiapas News. The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy began to issue Chiapas Digest. The Mexican Rural Development discussion group of the Applied Anthropology Computer Network began to compile news and analysis and make it available through an easily accessible gopher site: Chiapas-Zapatista News. The Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas has duplicated those files at its own Lanic gopher site. Information about the existence and paths of access to these sources were passed from those in the know (Mexican specialists) to those who wanted to know (anyone interested in the uprising).

As EZLN documents and news reports circulated they generated and were quickly accompanied by discussion, additional information from those with an intimate knowledge of Chiapas (e.g., academics who had done research in the area, human rights advocates concerned with its long history of abuse) and rapidly multiplying analyses of the developing situation and its background. All of this electronically circulated information and analysis fed into more traditional means of circulating news of working class struggle: militant newspapers, magazines and radio stations. The Anti-NAFTA Background The rapidity of this diffusion has been due, to a considerable degree,

not only to the technical capacity of such networks but to their political responsiveness and militancy. Basic to this rapid circulation of news and analysis of the uprising in Chiapas, has been the experience of the struggle against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Over the last few years the fight against NAFTA took the form of growing coalitions of grass-root groups in Canada, the United States and Mexico. In each country a broad coalition, such as the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade, was constituted by knitting together several hundred groups opposed to the new trade pact. That knitting together was accomplished partly through joint discussions and actions and partly through the sharing of information and analysis about the meaning and implications of the agreement. Increasingly, computer communications became a basic political tool for extremely rapid sharing among groups and individuals. The same processes of communication linked the coalitions in each country in a manner never before seen in the Western Hemisphere. The Anti-NAFTA campaign as a whole has sometimes been called an “unholy alliance” because alongside the grassroots networks which make up the bulk of the movement a variety of conservatives added their voices to the condemnation of NAFTA, including the leadership of the AFL-CIO and politicians like Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot. Such political manoeuvres to co-opt or recoup an autonomous movement are typical of American politics (whether in the U.S., Canada or Mexico) but these efforts have failed and the character and organization of the movement as a whole survives. Although the anti-NAFTA movement was unable to block ratification of the agreement, efforts to monitor the impact of NAFTA in order to facilitate struggle against it are ongoing and the goal is clearly its cancellation.

A New Organizational Form

Beyond the particular issue of the agreement, the process of alliance building has created a new organizational form –a multiplicity of rhizomatically linked autonomous groups– connecting all kinds of struggles throughout North America that have previously been disconnected and separate.

The responsiveness of this organizational form to the EZLN declaration of war derives from its composition. From the beginning, the building of alliances to oppose NAFTA involved not only the obviously concerned (U.S. workers threatened with losing their jobs as plants were relocated to Mexico, Mexicans concerned with the invasion of U.S. capital) but a wide variety of others who could see the indirect threats in this capitalist reorganization of trade relations, e.g., ecological activists, women’s groups, human rights organizations and yes, organizations of indigenous groups throughout the continent. Through the years of struggle against NAFTA position papers circulated, studies were undertaken, discussion raged about the interconnections of the concerns of all these groups. The anti-NAFTA struggle proved to be both a catalyst and a vehicle for overcoming the separateness and isolation which had previously weakened all of its component groups.

So, when the Zapatista National Liberation Army marched into San Cristobal and the other towns of Chiapas not only did those already concerned with the struggles of indigenous peoples react quickly, but so did the much more extensive organizational connections of the anti-NAFTA struggles. Already in place, and tapped daily by a broad assortment of groups were the computer conferences and lists of the anti-NAFTA alliances. Therefore, for a great many of those who would subsequently mobilize in support of the EZLN the first information on their struggles

came in the regular postings of the NAFTA Monitor on “trade.news” or “trade.strategy” either on Peacenet or through the Internet. Even if EZLN spokespeople had not explicitly damned NAFTA and timed their offensive to coincide with the first day of its operation in Mexico, the connections would have been made and understood throughout the anti-NAFTA network.

From Communicative to Physical Action

This same pre-existing fabric of connections helps explain why the incredibly rapid circulation of news and information was followed not only by analysis and written declarations of support, but by a wide variety of physical actions as well. What was surprising from the early days of January right through into February, was not the widespread and heartfelt demonstrations of support by tiny groups of leftists with traditions of international solidarity work, but the much more important rapid mobilization of other groups who not only took to the streets, e.g., the huge demonstrations in Mexico and smaller ones scattered through the U.S. and Canada (usually at Mexican embassies or consulates), but who immediately dispatched representatives to Chiapas to limit government repression by subjecting its actions to critical scrutiny, documenting its crimes and publically denouncing them. There can be no doubt that their actions –and the subsequent rapid circulation of their findings and declarations– contributed to blunting the states’ military counter-offensive, helping (along with all the other forms of protest in Mexico and without) force it to deemphasize military repression, accept mediation and undertake negotiations with an armed enemy it quite clearly would have preferred to squash (if it could, which is by no means obvious). Autonomous Indigenous Movement

Particularly important in these actions were not only groups concerned with human rights, both religious (e.g. the Catholic Bishops of Chiapas, the Canadian Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America) and secular (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Mexican National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations) –who have been increasing their capacity for such intervention in recent years– but also the movement of indigenous peoples which has been organizing itself locally and on an increasingly international scale for some time now.

Within Mexico, over the last several years, Indian and peasant groups and communities have been developing networks of cooperation to fight for the things they need: things like schools, clean water, the return of their lands, freedom from state repression (police and army torture, jailings and murders), and so on. Given the fierce autonomy of the participating communities –sometimes based on traditional ethnic culture and language– these networks have been shaped like the electronic web described above: in a horizontal, non- hierarchical manner. Indeed, one term often used by the participants in preference to “networks” –whose term “net” evokes being caught– is “hammock,” the name of a widely used, suspended sleeping device made from loosely woven string that reforms itself according to the needs (i.e., body shapes) of each user. These networks, which have been developed to interlink peasant and indigenous communities, not only connect villages in the countryside but also reach into the cities where neighborhoods created by rural-urban migrants retain close relations with their rural points of origin.

Many indigenous groups with clearly defined Indian culture and languages have not only organized themselves as such in self-defense but have reached out to each other across space to form regional and international alliances. This process has been going on in an accelerating

fashion for several years, not only in Mexico but throughout much of Americas and beyond. Spurred into new efforts by the example of the Black Civil Rights Movement in North America as early as the mid 1960s (e.g., the rise of the American Indian Movement) and forced into action by state backed assaults on their land in South and Central America (e.g., the enclosure of the Amazon), indigeneous peoples have been overcoming the spacial and political divisions which have isolated and weakened them through alliance and mutual aid.

In 1990 a First Continental Encounter of Indigenous Peoples was organized in Quito, Ecuador. Delegates from over 200 indigenous nations attended from throughout the hemisphere and launched a collaborative movement to achieve continental unity. To sustain the process a Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organizations (CONIC) was formed at a subsequent meeting in Panama in 1991. The central symbol and metaphor of the effort is the Mayan image of the Eagle and Condor with intertwined necks. Tradition has it that the Eagle represents the peoples of North America and the Condor those of the Southern continent.

The unity sought is not the unity of the political party or trade union –solidified and perpetuated through a central controlling body– but rather a unity of communication and mutual aid among autonomous nations and peoples.

A second Continental Encounter was organized in October of 1993 at Temoaya, Mexico. One of the hosting groups at that meeting was the Frente Independiente de Pueblos Indios (FIPI) and one of the members of FIPI was COLPUMALI from San Cristobal, Chiapas, one of the towns where the EZLN offensive began. COLPUMALI stands for Coordinadora de Organizaciones en Lucha del Pueblo Maya para su Liberacion, or Coordinating Committee of Organizations of the Mayan People in Struggle for Liberation. COLPUMALI is reportedly composed of 11 Mayan organizations from the three regions of Chiapas that have seen the most violent fighting since January 1st.

Faced with the violence of the Mexican military's counter-offensive, FIPI sent out a call to CONIC requesting that other Indians in the network come to Chiapas as observers to help constrain the state violence. CONIC responded immediately by organizing international delegations which travelled to the battle zones. When they arrived in Chiapas they were received by the local offices of the Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indigenas y Campesinas –made up of 280 indigenous and peasant organizations throughout the state. This kind of international publicity and pressure forced Mexican President Salinas to meet with 42 representatives of the Consejo on January 25th, a meeting which bypassed official political channels of mediation and legitimized (much to the chagrin of the state) the autonomous political organization of the Indians. (Not only has the EZLN rejected government agencies but it has also explicitly rejected any mediation by representatives of any political parties. In a January 13th communique, the EZLN stated: mediators “must not belong to any political party. We don't want our struggle to be used by the various parties to obtain electoral benefits nor do we want the heart that is behind our struggle to be misinterpreted.”) As a result of such international organization and action the positions of both the EZLN and the Indians of Chiapas more generally have been dramatically strengthened in their current struggles. It is that strength which has forced the government to the bargaining table.

The Roots of Organization: Self-valorization

These new organizational forms have not been created ex nihilo but have emerged on the material grounds of the self-activity of indigenous peoples. In a period in which affirmations of national and ethnic identity have acquired dramatically negative associations in Europe because of the murderous brutalities being perpetuated in ex-Yugoslavia and in parts of the former Soviet Union, the formation of regional and international regroupings of indigenous peoples in America working together in mutual support provides a striking contrast.

Strictly at the ideological level of national and ethnic identity, the situations in Central Europe and in America have superficial similarities –the affirmation of the right to self-determination within geographically defined spaces. The Bosnians, Serbs, Croates, Azeris, Georgians etc. all assert the right to their own land, languages and cultures, just like the indigenous groups in America.

But at a deeper level of the substance of the social relations embodied in those cultures, languages and relationships to the land there seem to be fundamental differences. Whatever their differences, the desires and goals of the contestants in Central Europe appear to be inextricable (within the present political configuration) from the inherited structures of capital accumulation understood as structures of social command organized through the subordination of life to endless work. The post-communist politicians who have whipped national and ethnic differences into antagonism, hatred and violence show no sign of any social project beyond enlarging their share of social command. That such command should today take the form of mass slaughter, humiliation (systematic rape) and the destruction of communities, while tomorrow it may take the form of factory work, office work and mindless ideology is quite consistent with the experience of the last few hundred years of capitalism. To date, there is no evidence of any fundamental reorientation of the socio- economic order of Central Europe beyond a political reorganization and an enlarged use of market mechanisms to achieve accumulation. Certainly, fundamental questioning does exist among Central European peoples; there are individuals and groups with deeper visions struggling against the current holocaust. Unfortunately, their power is so limited as to make their voices largely inaudible in a region dominated by the sounds of war and hatred.

Among the Indian nations and peoples of the Americas, on the other hand, the affirmation of national identity, of cultural uniqueness and of linguistic and political autonomy is rooted not only in an extensive critique of the various forms of Western Culture and capitalist organization which were imposed on them through conquest, colonialism and genocide, but also in the affirmation of a wide variety of renewed and reinvented practices that include both social relations and the relationship between human communities and the rest of nature. The struggles of the Indians in Chiapas are not only against their exploitation, against the disrespect with which they have traditionally been treated, against the brutality of their repression by private thugs, police and the Mexican military, against the theft of their lands and its resources, but they are also aimed at expanding the space, time and resources available to them for the elaboration of their own ways of being, their own cultures, religions, and so on. They are not fighting for a bigger piece of the pie, but for real autonomy from a social system which they understand very well has always enslaved them and sought to destroy their ways of life, a positive autonomy within which they can self-valorize, i.e., invent and develop their own ways of being. (This is not a process free of conflicts. See the discussion below about indigenous women's struggles.)

Such self-valorization has often been represented by outside observers, and sometimes by those involved directly, in terms of the preservation of tradition, of traditional ways and practices. As a result, indigenous peoples have often been seen as fundamentally reactionary, backward looking folks with static mentalities, conservative survivals of pre-capitalist times. The actual processes of social life within such indigenous communities, however, is much more complex and dynamic than is commonly recognized. From orthodox Marxists who have seen only the “idiocy” of rural life and debated how to convert Indians and peasants into good proletarians to the mainstream political scientists and economists of the post-World War II era who saw only “irrationality” and debated how to modernize rural areas and make agriculture more efficient, it is not an exaggeration to say that urban intellectuals from all points on the political spectrum have misunderstood –unintentionally or because it served their purposes– the lives and desires of peasant and indigeneous peoples.

Yet, in the last 20 years or so peasants and Indians have succeeded in making themselves heard above the tittering of ideologs and planners. This has happened partly because of their own self-activity, the self-organization described above, and partly because of fundamental shifts in the overall class composition which has made many much more willing to listen. Not only have the struggles of all kinds of “minorities” led to greater mutual interaction among them, but the qualitative critique of capitalism has led all kinds of people to seek out alternative sources of meaning that they may want to use in their own processes of self-regeneration and self-valorization. On the one hand, indigenous peoples themselves have organized around issues with a wider audience, forming such groups as the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) – one of those groups which has protested state repression in Chiapas. On the other hand, a seemingly endless assortment of individuals and groups from New Age romantics to militant ecologists have drawn on Indian ideas and practices to reshape their lives.

Nowhere has this been more obvious than in the ecological movement where many have explored indigenous attitudes and practices for inspiration in restructuring human relationships with nature. As a result it should come as no surprise to many that at the center of the conflicts in Chiapas today is land, just as in the days of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata from which the EZLN took its name. Not only were the Indians of Chiapas mostly excluded from the land reforms that began in 1934 under the presidency of Lazaro Cardenas, but in the years since, local landlords have repeatedly used both legal and illegal means to grab more and more land away from the Indians. The process of original accumulation long ago became permanent and the processes of enclosure have been a endless torture for Indians in Chiapas.

Moreover, the explicit link between the EZLN declaration of war and NAFTA derived, in part, from the latter’s contribution to enclosure of Indian lands. Using NAFTA (and an International Monetary Fund “structural adjustment program”) as an excuse, the Mexican government changed Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution that protected communal land from enclosure and by so doing made legal its selling and its concentration in the hands of local agribusiness and multinational corporations. Already the Banrural, the government’s rural development bank, is pushing forward with massive foreclosures against indebted farmers. The sale of foreclosed land to foreign agribusiness will help generate the foreign exchange to continue paying Mexico’s foreign debt. This is what the Indians have seen and this is what the EZLN has pointed out to the world. In late January, inspired by the EZLN’s successes, thousands of peasants blocked entrances to a dozen banks in Tapachula, a Chiapan town near the Guatemala border. Their demands? the cancelation of debts and the halting of land foreclosures. This on-going history of the expropriation of indige-

nous and peasant lands (which is accelerating the expulsion of people from the countryside into already horribly overcrowded and polluted cities) is why the EZLN has labelled NAFTA a “death sentence” to the indigenous population. A death sentence not only because individuals will be killed (many will be murdered and starved as they fight or retreat) but because ways of life are being killed. This is the history of capitalism which American Indians have suffered and resisted for 500 years. The valorization of capital has always meant the devaluation and destruction of non-capitalist ways of life, both those which preceded it and those which have sprung up seeking to go beyond it. It has come to be fairly widely recognized that among the vast extinctions caused by the ravages of capitalism have been not only animal and plant species but thousands of human cultures. The Indians in Chiapas, and those supporting them throughout the hemisphere are fighting to preserve a human diversity which is as valuable to all of us as it is to them.

The Refusal of Development

It is the concreteness of the diverse projects of self-valorization which founds the Indians’ struggle for autonomy, not only from the ideological and political fabric of domination in Mexico, but also from the broader capitalist processes of accumulation-as-imposition-of-work –which, in the South, goes by the name of “development”. In the North we come across the use of this term but rarely, usually in regard to plans to restructure the relationships between poor communities and the larger economy, e.g., community development, urban development. But in the South “development” has been not only the ideology of capitalist domination and of socialist promises but also a strategy of choice ever since the defeat of overt colonialism.

Since the beginning of the EZLN offensive, considerable commentary from both the state and a variety of independent writers have used the language of “two nations” to talk about the situation in Chiapas –a term made commonplace by the Conservative British writer and statesman Benjamin Disraeli over a century ago. The two nations, of course, are that Mexico whose development will be spurred by NAFTA and “el otro Mexico” which is backward and left behind. The ultimate solution proposed, as always, is “development”. Not surprisingly, within less than a month of the opening of the EZLN offensive, and following the defeat of the military counter-attack, the Mexican government announced that it was creating a “National Commission for Integral Development and Social Justice for Indigenous People” and promised more development aid to the area to expand those investments already made through its previous development project called Solidaridad. On January 27th it was also announced that these regional development efforts (and others in similar “backward” states) would be buttressed by World Bank loans of some \$400 million –loans which will increase the already staggering international debt which has been at the heart of class struggle in Mexico since the early 1980s.

The EZLN’s published responses to these proposals have articulated the long standing attitudes of many of Mexico’s peasant and indigenous populations –they have denounced these development plans as just another step in their cultural assimilation and economic annihilation. They point out that there have never been “two nations”; Chiapans have already suffered 500 hundred years of the capitalist imposition of work –they have simply been held at the bottom of the wage/income hierarchy. Significantly, in their initial declaration of war, the EZLN wrote “We use black and red in our uniform as our symbol of our working people on strike.” (Not surprisingly, the

states' negotiator Camacho Solis has called not only for an end to hostilities but for a "return to work".)

The Indians also know that further "development" does not mean the return of their land or of their autonomy. It means a continuation of their expulsion where they are reduced to impoverished wage earners or to a role well known to Indians in the U.S.: attractions within the tourist industry – a favorite "development project" for areas with "primitive" peoples. The government, one EZLN spokesperson wrote, sees Indians "as nothing more than anthropological objects, turistic curiosities, or part of a 'Jurassic Park'." Of government development programs? The people of Chiapas know them well: "The program to improve the conditions of poverty, this small stain of social democracy which the Mexican state throws about and which with Salinas de Gortari carries the name Pronasol [a so-called "social development fund"] is a joke which costs tears of blood to those who live under the rain and sun." In a statement issued on January 31st, the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee – General Command (CCRI-CG) of the EZLN pointed out that "The federal government is lying when it talks about us... There is no greater rupture in communities than the contemptible death that federal economic programs offer us."

But the free trade pact will open U.S. markets to Mexican exports, Salinas and Clinton have promised; Mexico will develop faster. This too the EZLN understands all too well. Chiapas is already an export oriented economy; it always has been: "the southeast continues to export primary materials, just as they did 500 years ago, and continues to export capitalism's principal production: death and misery." Is this just rhetoric? The EZLN knows the facts in excruciating detail: "The state's natural wealth doesn't only leave by way of roads. Chiapas loses blood through many veins: through oil and gas ducts, electric lines, train cars, bank accounts, trucks and vans, boats and planes, through clandestine paths, gaps and forest trails. This land continues paying tribute to the imperialists: petroleum, electric energy, cattle, money, coffee, banana, honey, corn, cacao, tobacco, sugar, soy, melon, sorghum, mamey, mango, tamarind, avocado and Chiapan blood flows as a result of the thousand some teeth sunk into the throat of southeastern Mexico." Do Clinton and Salinas really think they can sell export oriented development to Indians who are already all too painfully familiar with the draining away of the wealth of their land?

NAFTA also opens Mexico to U.S. exports and from the Indians' point of view the most threatening of these is corn, the basic food crop of the indigenous population and an important source of cash income. Although their rejection of cheap food imports has not received the same media coverage as that of rice farmers in Japan or French farmers in Europe (against the GATT), the story is the same: a recognition that a flood of cheap food produced with highly capital (including chemical) intensive methods in the U.S. will drive down prices and drive them from the land. Already they are suffering from low prices for coffee, another cash crop, due to a withdrawal of government support from that production, so their antagonism springs not from an overactive imagination but from bitter experience. (The economic impact from low coffee prices has been deepened by the disruption of the current harvest caused by the states' military counteroffensive. While the government has apparently promised some US\$11 million in emergency aid, the Banrural has also said that it would not change its plans to foreclose on indebted farmers.) The Indians also know that development means ecological destruction. The following passage from an EZLN document is sadly reminiscent of Karl Marx's earliest economic writings on new laws in Germany that made it a crime for peasants to gather wood in the forest. "They take the petroleum and gas away and leave the stamp of capitalism as change: ecological destruc-

tion, agricultural scraps, hyperinflation, alcoholism, prostitution and poverty. The beast is not satisfied and extends its tentacles to the Lacandon Forest: eight petroleum deposits are under exploration... The trees fall and dynamite explodes on land where peasants are not allowed to cut down trees to cultivate the land. Every tree that is cut down costs them a fine of 10 minimum wages and a jail sentence. The poor cannot cut down trees while the petroleum beast, every day more in foreign hands, can. The peasants cut them to survive, the beast to plunder... In spite of the trend of ecological awareness, the extraction of wood continues in Chiapas' forests. Between 1981 and 1989 2,44,777 meters cubed of precious woods, conifers and tropical tree types, were taken out of Chiapas... In 1988 wood exports brought a revenue of 23,900,000,000 pesos, 6,000% more than in 1980... Capitalism is in debt for everything that it takes away.”

The EZLN program would restore the land to its peoples. It would abolish the debts of farmers and demand repayment of the debt owed by those who have exploited the people and their land. The Indians of Chiapas would forget about “development” and begin the reconstruction of their world. They would not do it in one way, through a plan drawn up by a central committee; they would do it many ways, according to their diverse understandings, worked out and coordinated through cooperative efforts. The Autonomous Demands of Women Within the Indian Movement This refusal of development has grown to include the rejection not only of government sponsored, top-down development plans and projects, but also the reinforcement and strengthening of old injustices in Chiapan societies and culture. Alongside the struggle against land concentration, the exploitation of wage labor and political repression, there has also grown up a critique of racism (discrimination of latinos/mestizos against Indians) and of gender roles and the consignment of women to the bottom of society. The patriarchal character of Mexican society is well known; that of the Indian communities less recognized but often no less real. The struggle for the “survival” of Indian culture has also involved the struggle for its transformation –from within. In this case, as usual, those who have suffered most have been at the forefront of the fight for change. In traditional Indian society, when the good land was theirs, before they were pushed into poor forest lands often far away from good water sources, life was not so hard. Their agricultural practices were often land intensive rather than labor intensive and they were able to reap an abundant and diverse harvest. But as their land was stolen from them, and it became harder and harder to survive on fewer and fewer resources, life became increasingly difficult, especially for women. Some of their traditional tasks, such as food preparation and cleaning, have always involved a lot of work, but the situation worsened. For example, it is generally Indian women who must be up at the crack of dawn to grind corn for the day’s bread: tortillas. It is generally Indian women who must haul water for cooking, drinking, cleaning and bathing. It is generally Indian women who cut firewood (now illegal) and haul it home for cooking. It is generally Indian women who do the cooking, and take care of the children, and of the sick. But hard work makes strong women –if it doesn’t kill them– and such women have challenged their traditional roles.

This challenge found support in the EZLN and acceptance from its leaders. Not only were women encouraged to join the EZLN but they have been, according to all accounts, treated as equals to the point that many women have officer status and men and women are expected to carry the burdens of work and fighting equally. When Indian women organized in dozens of communities to produce a code of women’s rights, the EZLN leadership composed of Mayan leaders –the CCRI-CG– adopted the code unanimously. The “Women’s Law” included the rights of all women, “regardless of race, creed, color or political affiliation”, “to participate in the struggle in any way that their desire and capacity determine”, the right to “work and receive a just salary”,

the right to “decide the number of children they have and care for”, the right “to participate in the matters of the community and have charge if they are freely and democratically elected”, the right (along with children) “to Primary Attention in their health and nutrition”, the right “to choose their partner and are not obliged to enter into marriage”, the right “to be free of violence from both relatives and strangers. Rape and attempted rape will be severely punished”, the right to “occupy positions of leadership in the organization [EZLN] and hold military ranks in the revolutionary armed forces”, and finally “all the rights and obligations which revolutionary laws and regulations give”. According to one report, when one of the male committee members quipped “The good part is that my wife doesn’t understand Spanish”, an EZLN officer told him: “You’ve screwed yourself, because we’re going to translate it into all the [Mayan] languages.” Clearly, the passage of this Bill of Rights reflects both the problems and ongoing struggles of women within the diverse Indian cultures of Chiapas. What is unusual and exciting about these developments is how those struggles are not being marginalized or subordinated to “class interests” but are being accepted as integral parts of the revolutionary project.

Conclusion?

I began this brief discussion with a question about whether the revolt in Chiapas is just one more local revolt, or something more. I think it is much more. Once we understand its sources, motivations and methods, I think we can learn a great deal. It does not offer a formula to be imitated; its new organizational forms are not a substitute for old formulas –Leninist or social democratic. It provides something different: an inspiring example of how a workable solution to the post-socialist problem of revolutionary organization and struggle can be sought. The struggles of the Indians in Chiapas, like the anti-NAFTA movement which laid the groundwork for their circulation, demonstrate how organization can proceed locally, regionally and internationally through a diversity of forms which can be effective precisely to the degree that they weave a fabric of cooperation to achieve the (often quite different) concrete material projects of the participants. We have known for some time that a particular organization can only be substituted for the processes of organization at great peril. It is a lesson we have learned the hard way in struggle for, and then against, trade unions, social democratic and revolutionary parties.

What we see today is the emergence of just such a fabric of cooperation among the most diverse kinds of people, linking sectors of the working class throughout the international wage and income hierarchy. That fabric has not appeared suddenly, out of the blue; it has been woven. And in its weaving many threads have broken, and been retied, or new knots have been designed to replace those which could not hold. It is not easy to construct a hammock, to use the Mexican word, but we see that it is possible.

In many ways the revolt in Chiapas is an old story, 500 years old. But it is also a very new, and exciting story. The EZLN offensive has taken place within and been supported by an international movement of indigenous peoples. That movement itself has established many connections with other kinds of people, other sectors of the working class, from blue collar factory workers fearing job loss, to white collar intellect workers using the most advanced technological means of communication and organization available. Ever since the rise of capitalism imposed working class status on most of the world’s people, they have struggled. In those struggles isolation has meant weakness and defeat, connection has meant strength. Connection comes with

mutual recognition and the understanding that struggles can be complementary and mutually reinforcing. As long as workers in the U.S. and Canada saw Mexicans as alien others, parts of the unknown Third World, capital could play the later off against the former. But struggles throughout the continent have forced a degree of integration that such blindness is becoming easier and easier to overcome. Part of the work of the anti-NAFTA movement involved the assessment of dangers and the discussion of alternative approaches in the light of diverse situations and needs. Part of the work involved circulating the results of that research and those consultations to a wider audience. The result has been the beginning of a transformation in the consciousness and understanding of the North American working class and a consequent growth in the ability to cooperate in struggle.

Today, the uprising in Chiapas results in continent-wide mobilization. But this is not the only such mobilization. Mexican factories which could once repress militant workers with impunity are now subject to observation and sanction by workers from the U.S. and Canada who are increasingly intervening to constrain repression just as indigenous militants and human rights activists have intervened to help the EZLN. Multinational corporations who could pay off Mexican officials and dump toxic wastes into communities along the border are today subjected to increased scrutiny and sanction by workers and ecologists. When the EZLN demands, as it has, that Chiapan workers be paid wages equal to those North of the border, it is a demand heard, understood and supported by increasing numbers of those Northern workers whose wages are being driven downward by “competition” from the South. When the Indian communities of Chiapas fight for their land, it is increasingly understood by those elsewhere not as reactionary but as the equivalent of the struggles of waged workers for more money, less work and more opportunity to develop alternatives to capitalism.

Today, the social equivalent of an earthquake triggered by the EZLN on January 1st is rumbling through Mexican society. Every day brings reports of people moving beyond amazement and concern to action. Peasants and Indians completely independent of the EZLN are taking up its battle cries and occupying municipal government buildings, blocading banks and demanding their lands and their rights. Students and workers are being inspired not just to “support the campesinos” but to launch their own strikes against domination and exploitation throughout the social factory. How far these aftershocks will reach and how much they will change the world will depend not just on the EZLN or on the Indians of Chiapas, but on the rest of us.

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Harry Cleaver
The Chiapas Uprising and the Future of Class Struggle in the New World Order
February 14, 1994

Retrieved on 2nd September 2021 from libcom.org
This article was written for the Italian journal *RIFF-RAFF* published in Padova, Italy. Revised
versions have also been published in *STUDIES IN POLITICAL ECONOMY* and in *CANADIAN
DIMENSION*.

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