

# **Mexico is not only Chiapas**

**Nor is the rebellion in Chiapas merely a Mexican affair**

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December 1997

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In January 1994, in the south eastern state of Chiapas in Mexico, news of the Zapatistas armed revolt composed mainly of Indian peasants, travelled all over the world bringing about an explosion of interest and information on Mexico because the rebellion was automatically connected with the Mexican revolution. In this text we undertake an analysis of the class struggles in Mexico since the beginning of the century up till now, which includes a critical presentation of the guerilla movement of the Zapatistas. Among last year's events, a presentation of the "National Democratic Convention" was decided upon, not only because its character transcends the boundaries of Chiapas but also because it is indicative of the political direction of the class struggle. More than a year later nothing has been concluded. Whereas the Zapatistas still constitute a considerable force, the recent devaluation of the peso and the attempted military repression of the movement, has created a deeper crisis of class relations in Mexico.

The following analysis is from a viewpoint which goes beyond the outdated anti-imperialist distinctions of a "First World" and a "Third World". The Capitalist International, the only class unfortunately that has the clearest class consciousness, has seen to that. This class wouldn't have won until now if it hadn't imposed itself on "underdeveloped" and "developed" countries simultaneously. Because to every privatization in West Europe there corresponds a new wave of immigrants from East Europe; to every temp worker there's a former "privileged" one and to every homeless person in North America there's a landless peasant in South America. It is against this class that the Chiapas ejidatarios rebel, and their struggle has a universal dimension which transcends south east Mexico. It's in fact the same struggle that takes place everywhere already, with different intensity and forms, against immiseration and alienation. If we have managed to show this, then we think we have contributed not only to the Chiapanecos' fight, but to our own.

## **THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION (CONVENTION NATIONAL DEMOCRATICA-CND), SAN CRISTOBAL, CHIAPAS — AGUASCALIENTES, LACANDONA JUNGLE, 6–9 August 1994.**

"Zapata vive, la lucha sigue!"

In June 1994 in their Second Declaration from the Lacandona Jungle, the EZLN addressed an invitation to the National Democratic Convention for the purpose of introducing propositions about a transitional government and a new constitution. EZLN's sub-commander Marcos intensified his letter-writing mania inviting Mexican personalities within the left and center-left spectrum. Due to the Zapatista's appeal to "Civil Society" the range of those who finally participated was quite big: non-government organisations in general, leaders of peasant and Indian organisations, members of "independent parties", a few academics, union delegates, feminists, a few businessmen, lesbians, homosexuals, members of organisations in defense of the vote and naturally journalists or fake journalists (like myself). The organising committee of the CND consisted of Zapatistas delegates and various other organisations (the "Caravan of the Caravans", the "Chiapanecos Assembly for Democracy" etc with a dominant view in favour of the elections).

On Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> of August in San Cristobal Mesas-workshops were formed to discuss the "peaceful transition to democracy, the elections, the formation of a National Project and the defense of the vote". In spite of the great majority of supporters of the oppositional PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) and the prevalent tendency in favour of the elections there was

a general distrust of the parties and a minority (1) against the elections and in favour of the formation of a National People's Assembly –a Transitional Government– consisting of peasants, workers and Indians.

Among the demands of the Mesas (to which the majority agreed) the following ones were included: Salinas's resignation, expulsion of members of the PRI (Party of Institutional Revolution, the government party) from administrative posts, mobilisation against a possible electoral fraud, political trial of Salinas, electoral reform for the representation of the Indians and all the ethnic groups, recognition of the EZLN as a belligerent force, breaking up the system of National Security, non-assumption of office of any candidates in case of high abstention, expulsion of the army from the states of Chiapas, Guerrero and Michoacan and satisfaction of the 11 demands of the EZLN. All were almost devoutly accepted by the Mesas. The same atmosphere of confusion, recrimination, vexation and euphoria that prevailed on Saturday evening in San Cristobal with thousands of people bustling in and out of the Mesas and discussing in circles in the streets while songs were heard (and tourists were complaining about the sudden lack of rooms) would prevail even more intensely in the jungle.

6 or 7 thousand people – in hundreds of buses – in the drive towards Aguascalientes (2) passed through Mexican army outposts and then through regions controlled by the Zapatistas. Swarms of clapping and cheering Indians could be seen everywhere along the road, many of those holding posters of Zapata and placards with slogans in favour of fair elections.

During the descent to the jungle enthusiasm gave way to exhaustion (the last ones to arrive in Aguascalientes had journeyed for about 24 hours) and then the excitement on first contacting the Zapatistas at their outpost. At last in Aguascalientes Fitzcarraldo's Ship came into view: for 28 days, 600 Zapatistas had constructed this gigantic amphitheatre, made of tree trunks and covered by a huge tent, surrounded by hundreds of smaller tents. Above the stage two Mexican flags were hanging, behind it the honoured guests were seated and the place was full of posters with subjects from the Mexican Revolution. There was a colourful and diverse crowd from elderly, veteran co-fighters of Emiliano Zapata's original army, to young punks, to contemporary armed Zapatistas scattered all over, to reporters armed with cameras; all in an atmosphere of confusion, exuberance, turmoil and comings and goings beneath the hot tropical sun. Angry protests were caused when a mural appeared on the stage depicting Marcos and Zapata on horseback shaking hands and beneath them Cardenas with the bishop of Chiapas Samuel Ruiz (3). Protests from many sides led to the withdrawal of the painting.

Around evening Marcos' appearance on stage set off an outburst of chanting: "Marcos, our friend, the people are with you!", "Transitional Government and a new constitution", "Long live Ramona and Ana Maria" (women Zapatistas), "Long live Self-government by the Indians", "Let the National Convention be an electoral force" but by way of a reply: "All against the electoral farce". Songs about Zapata could be heard as well as the guevarist anthem of the 70's "Dressed in olive green, politically alive, comrade, you haven't died, we'll take revenge for your death". Marcos announced the presiding committee of the CND and called upon commander Tacho to speak, who declared that the EZLN give Aguascalientes over to the CND. He also presented the people's committees of the EZLN, the civil guards, Indian women, men and children with scarves on their faces and staves in their hands -one of the most touching moments of the Convention. Afterwards, Marcos presented the EZLN army, whose gun-barrels had white bands around them, indicating that "these guns are not to confront the "Civil Society", but paradoxically, they wish to become useless". Marcos' speech, a mixture of sentimentalism, patriotism, poetry and populism

was received reverentially and in dead silence by the audience. After exulting at the large CND attendance, Marcos went on: “thanks to the EZLN having mobilized parts of society which had until recently been sunk in apathy and inability to get over their localisms”, he made clear that the EZLN, “(do not expect from the CND) a civil arm... a civil pretext for war...or for submission...nor the dubious honour of a historical vanguard, of the numerous vanguards that made us suffer... We expect from the CND the opportunity to search for and find those to whom we will hand over the flag that we found deserted and forgotten in the palaces of power... To struggle so that all Mexicans will recognize it as their own, to become the national flag again, your flag, companeros... We hope that there will be enough maturity at this CND, so that this place will not be converted into a terrain for settling internal accounts, something sterile and emasculated... We are moving aside but we are not leaving. We hope that the horizon will open up so that we will not be necessary anymore, we the dead since always, who have to die again in order to live. We hope that this CND will give us an opportunity, the opportunity we were denied by those who govern this country, to return to our subterranean life with dignity after we have fulfilled our duty. The opportunity to return to silence, to the night out of which we came, to the death we lived in, the opportunity to disappear in the same way we appeared, one morning, without a face, without future. To return to the depths of history, of the dream, of the mountains...”

Amidst a deluge of applause, Marcos left the stage giving the Mexican flag to Rosario Ibarra (president of the CND and the FNCR, National Front Against Repression, a leftist organisation). These moments of patriotic effusions were soon followed by a real storm; a tropical rain storm that swept over everything. Despite the witticisms subverting the original slogans: “Zapata lives, the struggle goes on” becoming, ‘Zapata lives, the rain goes on’ — and the few brave ones who half-naked were sloshing about in the mud — it meant the sudden end of the first day of the CND in the jungle. The next day after several participants gave speeches that were no more than greetings and a minimal agreement on mobilizations against a possible election fraud was finalized, there followed Marcos’s press conference. Confident like a pop star and evasive like a politician, he answered various questions ironically. He expressed again the EZLN’s wish for a dignified peace and to make efforts to contact other guerilla armies in the country. To his question if he would take off his mask, Marcos replied, “Yes, if you want it. You tell me”. The cries of “NO!” confirmed that the Marcos symbol should remain masked in order to preserve the legend and, in no way, becoming an ordinary, recognizable mortal.

So, in this mish mash of people; in this “Civil Society” in a festive and tense atmosphere somewhere between a rave-up and a political meeting; in this National Convention that wasn’t really much of a convention at all, there actually was confirmed a vague and abstract will for “change”, “democracy” and “peace”. It was a symbolic gesture just before the elections. A manifestation of patriotism and reformism, contradictory expectations and general promises amidst the loud “Viva!”.

## **FROM THE REVOLUTION (1910–1920) ...**

“You take Revolucion to the end, turn right and you are on Reforma”.

Mexican joke referring to the streets one takes to reach Downtown Mexico City.

At the end of the previous century the Porfiriato, Diaz’s dictatorship, combined an expanding capitalist growth with an oligarchic-dictatorial state. Capital’s dominance through domestic

and foreign monopolies, the centralisation of economy and political power on a national scale caused the gradual disintegration of the old traditional, feudal structures. The new bureaucrats and technocrats (the Positivists and Social Darwinists) provided the ideology necessary for the concentration of capital and the coordination of local big landowners with central political power.

Agriculture, subsumed by capital was creating an increasing class of rural proletarians consisting of landless peasants, unemployed or farm workers alongside peons and immiserated Indian comuneros. On the other hand, small-scale land owners became increasingly disadvantaged with the onset of large-scale units of production. The working class, concentrated in the north because of the high degree of investment there, consisted of independent artisans, the main body of the industrial proletariat and a relatively better paid skilled section. The artisans taking one blow after the another over a period of time gradually united with the rest of the workers who, in their turn, took to strike action or more violent revolts which were ruthlessly crushed.

The edifice of the Porfiriato started to shake due to a multiform discontent reflecting different and conflicting interests which later took the form of an armed revolt. The conflict within the bourgeoisie between its (mainly northern) industrial-financial sector and the more traditional, local big landowners, a conflict which represented the antithesis of the bourgeois-democratic project to oligarchy and authoritarianism; the discontent of the petite-bourgeoisie in the face of the monopolies; the rage of the proletariat and the comuneros and the ambitions of the intellectuals who were suffocated within the repressive regime were the basic reasons for the explosion which followed.

Emanating from the modern industrial-financial bourgeoisie, Madero came to power supported by Villa, his initial admirer, and Zapata. The latter, an uncompromising fighter for agrarian reform, faced with Madero's "betrayal" (i.e. his loyal adherence to his class) called for the continuation of the revolution, issuing in November 1911, his Ayala Plan (4). Against General Huerta's dictatorship (1913-14) a loosely united front was formed consisting of three forces: Zapatistas in the south, composed mainly of ejidatarios or landless peasants with a communal social tradition, Villa's army in the north composed chiefly of petite-bourgeois and proletarians and the Constitutionalists who represented the middle-classes, some landlords and even some proletarians and peasants who believed in their socialist propaganda (5). The Convention at Aguascalientes in 1914, where these three armies met, proved the impossibility of their alliance.

Beside the legendary figures of a controversial Villa, and a fervent Emiliano Zapata whose indomitable proletarian consciousness combined a romantic nationalism with faith in a democratic government which would make real the popular vision of revolutionary change and agrarian reform, the internationalist, anarcho-communism of Ricardo Flores Magon stands out. Starting as a liberal, Magon gradually formed his anarchist ideas (which for tactical purposes he did not openly declare until 1910) and tried to turn the political revolution into a social revolution. Organizing strikes and revolts, influencing and agitating amongst workers and peasants mainly in northern Mexico (and having taken over the northern part of the state of Baja California) the Mexican Liberal Party (the PLM) founded by Magon, not only ignited many land expropriations and seizures of the means of production but also gave such actions a clear communist perspective, as can be seen in the 1911 manifesto.

The outcome of the class war was determined by the alliance made between the powerful workers' union, the Casa del Obrero Mundial (espousing an anarcho-sindicalist and corporate socialist ideology) and the Constitutionalists in exchange for promises of financial support and the satisfaction of some demands of the workers. Among the motives of the workers' class

alliance one cannot ignore their discontent with Zapatistas' religiosity and Villistas' brutality, whose increasing militarism had turned them into professional soldiers.

After the crushing of the Zapatistas, the Villistas and the PLM, the 1917 constitution crystallized the dominant nationalist, anti-imperialist and socialist/populist ideology of the post-revolutionary Mexican state (6). Some of its reformist articles which provided for anti-clerical measures, agrarian reform and labour rights had constituted part of the 1906 programme of the PLM. It was the triumph of the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie over the peasants and workers and, ever since, it would make use of the content of the revolution in its own interests.

The enslavement of the working class by the state through limited concessions inaugurated a long practice of populism combined with repression and submission to the state. Alongside a defeated peasantry and a crippled working class an expanding petite-bourgeoisie started forming which benefited from state privileges. During the Revolution military men, bureaucrats, intellectuals and union leaders emerged, who later staffed the new state mechanism. This new bourgeois-bureaucratic state was legitimized with "Revolution" as its ideological banner recuperating and distorting its content. "Revolution" as a myth became the unifying ideology of the state domination in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **...TO THE MODERN STATE**

"We want a liberal, democratic and nationalist government...the concessions to labour are granted within the economic possibilities of the capitalist sector". Lazaro Cardenas

When the sound of the last revolutionary guns had died away, the Mexican state faced the double need of its reinforcement and capitalist development. The problem of controlling foreign capital (setting up the Banco de Mexico was the first act of co-operation between Mexican and foreign capital) and the class struggle that constantly intensified in the face of state manipulation, together with the corruption of the official labour leaders and the 1929 crisis, meant things couldn't wait any longer. The still unfulfilled promises of the Mexican Revolution threatened the legitimacy of the successive governments and the state in general as a vehicle of its ideology.

With Lazaro Cardenas' "socialistic" rhetoric and populist practises, in 1934 Mexico enters the period of state-regulated capitalism, a strategy already in use in America and Europe. The necessity of reformism which meant concessions to peasants and workers, nationalisations of selected sectors, redefinition of the conditions of the imperialist intervention, discipline of the recalcitrant unproductive landlords and "comprador" bourgeoisie heightened the "popular" role of the state. At the same time it satisfied the interests of the modern bourgeoisie.

The "politics of the masses" consolidated the corporate state that absorbed "Civil Society". The strengthened national political party (7) has acted ever since as a powerful administrative committee organizing and dividing society into separate constituencies that depend on it; class struggle became "legalized" through the recognition of the labour movement as an official, national one: the powerful until today CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) was formed. CNC (National Peasant Confederation) was also formed and the "popular sector" of the party consisted of state employee unions, women's and youth organisations.

The consolidation of the democratic-capitalist ideology of the "common interest" became possible through the creation of a climate of "national unity" thanks to Cardenas' "anti-imperialist"

politics. This climate reached its height when the mainly American and English-controlled oil-fields were expropriated in 1938. The limited agrarian reform laid the basis for state-regulated capitalist agriculture. Land redistribution (through the expropriation of many unproductive latifundias) and the granting of state credits aimed at aiding small private farms so that the national market could be expanded. However, the intention was the support of the largest and most productive landholdings under state regulation. In 1940, at the end of Cardenas' presidency, his "socialist" politics had produced the following results regarding agricultural production: over 60% of the peasants were either landless or owners of inadequate plots of lands or ejidatarios trying to compete with big owners of fertile lands, capital and technology. Ejidatarios were forced gradually to let their holdings to those big landowners and work the land on their behalf. This led to the flourishing of neolatifundismo precisely in those areas of agrarian reform.

In general, during Cardenas's period the basis of the modern state was laid blunting class conflicts through the combined social-patriotic politics of concessions and repression. Starting in this period, the practise of populism and corporativism would form a historical continuity on the state and ideological level that holds until now.

## **BETWEEN THE SCYLLA OF CAPITAL AND THE CHARYBDIS OF IDEOLOGY**

Cardenas' reforms and the modernization of capitalist development soon bore fruit. The twenty year period (1940–1960), just before the tumultuous appearance of the first threatening radical movements, is the one with the biggest and most rapid capital accumulation. The role of the state becoming more and more authoritarian and technocratic is crucial to this concentration of capital. Industrialization took a different course from the still colonized economies of Latin America (8).

With the "Green Revolution" there begins the modernization of agricultural production, which increases six-fold between 1940 and 1975. The programmes of the "Green Revolution" (a capitalist rationalization) financed by the World Bank (and initially by the Rockefeller Foundation) expressed the state's need both to control the fragile social relations in the countryside and to organize a cheap food supply for the hordes of the proletarians in the cities. This process took place not only in Mexico but also in other countries where the agrarian question was vital (India for example). Initially, regions in the north were selected where "revolutionary" landlords possessed vast quantities of land (10). A series of loans to pay for modern technological input (from irrigation to chemical fertilizers) caused not only the intensification of cultivation and the increase of productivity but also the replacement of traditional crops with new ones for export. The onerous terms of credits for the aquisition of the means of production led ejidatarios or minifundistas (small-scale landholders) to immiseration or to bankruptcy. Many got forced off their land, becoming part of the "surplus population" known since the first enclosures in history and always present when "agrarian reform" takes place, becoming suitable for multiple purposes: as a reserve army, as an industrial proletariat, or, as land labourers. Besides the forced land expropriations, which added to the possessions of the landlords, another usual practice was the periodical parcelization of ejidos. This functioned as an absorber of social unrest since it maintained the idea of revolutionary land distribution.



On the whole the state's ability to present itself as a guardian of the ideas of the Mexican Revolution explains the relative political stability of the decades after the "pioneer" Cardenas's presidency as well as the recuperation of the social movements. The revolutionary heritage of the peasants and the workers was taught through the state educational system and the state invoked it as its own mother and that's why it assumed the role of its defender (10). When the proletarians did not content themselves with state recognition of their contribution to the making of a "powerful, independent" state and showed vigorously their ingratitude they were turned automatically into "enemies of the Revolution" and "anti-patriots". However, the systematic propaganda of the national-democratic advances gave results: many peasants, workers, petite-bourgeois believed that the big trade unions CTM, CNC and the "popular sector" really represented them.

Interchanging with the unitary ideology of national interest, class harmony and populism other divisive ideologies dominate Mexican society: Indianism (Indigenismo) and that patriarchal Mexican inclination towards machismo. Saint, whore and cheap worker are the three basic roles the Mexican woman is called upon to assume (whereas Mexican capitalism promotes feminism, at the same time, sexism is reinforced -a common practice everywhere).

Indianism, the official recognition of the Indian heritage, was one of the contradictory achievements of the Revolution. It holds a central place in Mexican nationalism (all too often the invocation of the Indian heritage is overestimated as against the dominant mestizo composition of the Mexican people or conflicts with the more conservative, pro-Spanish religious tendencies). Behind the hypocritical ideological mask of the "national heritage", that runs through Mexican history, there lies the state effort to destroy and assimilate the Indian culture within the national commodity economy. Since 1948, INI (National Indian Institute) serves as a channel for the legalization of Indians' exploitation by caciques (11), bosses, recruiters of migrant labourers, moneylenders, merchants, landlords and their thugs. According to anthropologist Marcela Lagarde "INI programmes are directed and planned by anthropologists who proclaim themselves to be for the Indian, but whose end is that he cease to be one" (see Cockroft, p. 147-148).

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Published in *Common Sense* no. 22.

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