Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists
Our Crime Is Defending Our Rights
Interview with a Magonista
2006

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This interview was done by Dawn, MJ, Dominic, and Diana: two members of NEFAC-Boston and two members of Boston por CIPO-RFM and the Jericho Movement. Many thanks to BD for additional translation. This interview is from The Northeastern Anarchist #11 (Spring/Summer 2006)… which also includes essays on Especifismo, Organizational Dualism, the Quebec 'national question', participatory economics, and much more!

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NEFAC-Boston has been working with Boston por CIPO-RFM, a solidarity group seeking to organize support for the autonomous indigenous villages in Oaxaca, Mexico in the face of harsh state and paramilitary repression. A number of CIPO members have emigrated to the US, giving us the opportunity and privilege of speaking with them directly about the situation in their communities.

NEFAC and the CIPO-RFM are both member organizations of International Libertarian Solidarity, a network for solidarity and mutual aid among "anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, revolutionary syndicalist, and clearly anti-Statist, non-party aligned social organisations which run along libertarian principles."

This spring, we sat down with a former member of the CIPO-RFM organizing committee, who is now living in the US and working as a farmworker and baker. Over a delicious meal and a few bottles of wine, we learned more about the remarkable project taking place in Oaxaca.

NEA: Tell us about yourself.

My name is Alfonso, and I'm from the community of Plan de Zaragoza Nuyoo, in Oaxaca.

In my community, we have problems because of the tricks of the government. They come to our communities looking for votes, and then they forget about us. They promise us many things, such as food, schools, roads, hospitals and medicine for the people, but they don't come through with it.

For those reasons, we joined the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca – Ricardo Flores Magon, the CIPO-RFM. It's the house of the poor that struggle for justice….

Involved with the CIPO-RFM are currently 30 communities of the peoples: Chatinos, Mixtecos, Chinantecos, Yucatecos, Zapotecos, Triquis, blacks and mestizos…. We decided it was the best way to organize ourselves, because the government didn't help us with the problems that we have.

Together with other communities, that have the same problems with agricultural issues, and with compañeros that have been murdered, the government up until the present time has done nothing…. They have exploited the forests, the water, animals…

NEA: Since your community has been involved in the CIPO, what successes have been achieved?

The government has given only a few things: a little bit of shelter, but nothing complete…. They have built small bridges, only very small ones. But what we want resolved are the agrarian problems, which are more related to justice…

And respect for women, children and elderly people. And that people recognize us for our customs, and ways of living, and ways of thinking. Because we don't believe in the same things as the government.

NEA: What are the agrarian problems in your community or others?

Murdered compañeros, people who have been tortured by the government, who have been kidnapped …. The paramil-

itaries are stealing the wood, taking away the water, other things…. Agrarian problems are when they rob us of our parcels of land…. They're also trying to sell our culture, our language, our community dances, and our traditional clothing.

NEA: What do you use the land for?

To plant corn and beans[FOOD IN GENERAL: corn, beans, coffee, onions, herbs, garlic, et al]. They're communal lands; they are free lands. And what we want is that they don't steal it, that the government doesn't take it—because where would we go if they took it from us?

NEA: Where do the people who join the paramilitaries come from? Do any of them come from your communities, or do they come from elsewhere?

They come from other communities. They have robbed, but always the government directs them, and pays them, and they come into our villages under the orders of the government, and commit these acts in such a way that it doesn't appear that the government does it.

We call them paramilitaries because they have arms, they are from villages…. Half of them are indigenous, and the other half are just people from the PRI who support the paramilitaries.

We have made our struggle, but non-violently. There are no communities in which there are paramilitaries and CIPO members…

Our weapon is our voice, and we use animals. We use rats, pigs, cockroaches, so that the government pays attention to us. We go directly to the buildings where the authority works in, offices and things, and put all the animals in there.

One time we put four rats and four mice in a government office. People were screaming and jumping up on chairs. The next day, the press reported that there were several hundred! The intent was to get the government to listen, to heed us. We succeeded in getting some building materials—but no progress on the big repressions.

We do those things, and our crime is defending our rights, defending our communities. The government wants to make us sound like we're the murderers, we're the criminals, but it's not that way.

NEA: Are friends and comrades of yours in prison right now?

We have two members that are in jail right now, in Etla prison. One is called Joaquín Pérez, and the other one is Juan Alavez, and they're from San Isidro Aloapám. Their only crimes have been to defend their forests, and defend their communities, and defend their water. And those are the only crimes, or the reasons, that they're jailed.

NEA: You've spoken about your community. We're curious to hear about how you became involved.

When I was 15, I moved from my community to Oaxaca City to study, because on the land there's no work. Or there is work, but there's no money, and you can't support yourself. So I moved to the city out of necessity, and there I started to learn Mixteco again, and I started to learn about Plan de Zaragoza, and I said well, my people are my people, and I have no reason to abandon them.

This is when I discovered that the community was already with the CIPO-RFM. Before the people didn't know anything—they hadn't even paved the road, there weren't any markets, or schools. But when I got back, the community had advanced at least a little bit. And there was a women's program of growing organic vegetables.

We've achieved these kinds of projects not just in my community, but in different communities helping each other out, through guetza, which is basically a Mixteco word for mutual aid.

When I came back, people in my village were talking about CIPO, and were saying, "Let's get this going, because there's no reason for us to allow the government to continue coming into our community and taking advantage of us." CIPO doesn't try

So we win and we lose, things go up and down. But the CIPO always keeps on, lives, and doesn't give up. Even though the government continues to imprison us, and persecute us, our voice will not get quieter.

That we could get some kind of permit that would allow us to come in and out of the country, because we don't come here to rob, we just come here to work. Not just for the Mexicans, but for everybody, because I think people from other countries come here to work, they don't come here to… they're not terrorists, they're just hard-working people.

NEA: What do you hope happens next in Oaxaca?

I would like the government to resolve all the conflicts for the members of the CIPO, and that there be no more conflicts or assassinations…. And that they stop persecuting our members…. and imprison the murderers.

To maintain our independence from political parties, to not ask for permission of the Party or of rich people. The government should support the people who are sick, because it's difficult: in a lot of the communities there are no hospitals, and so these people have to travel maybe up to ten hours to get to a hospital, and then sometimes they die.

There should be education for all those who want to study, they should provide schools, drinkable water. To have electricity and telephones, which some of the communities still don't have. And for those members who have nothing, that they have some kind of housing.

And that they stop stealing our culture.

NEA: How do you feel the CIPO-RFM's struggle is going?

The government has wanted to get rid of and be done with the CIPO. They go to the communities that are part of the Indigenous Council, they offer them maybe a kilo of rice, or building materials, and the people are not educated and don't understand what the government is trying to do. In the CIPO, we don't cast the people who collaborate with the government aside. We continue to work with them, and educate them, so that in the end they figure it out. And we hope they realize what's happening, and return to work with the CIPO…

to trick the people in the communities with things like clothes, a kilo of rice, a liter of cooking oil. No. It's simply to come together, and to work together.

International visitors have come to CIPO and given workshops about different skills, like clothes-making, community radio, computers, and silkscreen printing. They have also taught us about their countries of origin.

And training for women—but I'm not familiar with this. There's a part of the CIPO-RFM called the Women's Area. They are in charge of setting up talks and holding workshops. It is recognized that women can do just as much, and more, than men. The voice of women is valued in the CIPO.

NEA: Can you tell us a little more about the organization and decision-making that happens in CIPO communities?

There are no leaders. We don't command each other. We only hold assemblies, and we all decide with each other, not one person alone. We make decisions through the base councils, under the authority of the people. Also, we carry out decisions through the organizing junta [organizing committee].

In the communities, no one is looking for power; no one wants to be the boss of anyone else. There is agreement that everyone respects each other, and the people decide upon their representatives…

NEA: What are the assemblies talking about and deciding?

In these assemblies, we talk about the problems that are facing the communities, such as the lack of potable water. Other things discussed here are projects with cows, what will be done with them, or also projects with bees. We decide who is going to be in charge of those. So those are the little things that we discuss.

NEA: What do the representatives do?

The delegates of the organizing junta live in the CIPO house, which is in Oaxaca City. The delegates of the base committees are the ones who actually live in the communities.

When it's necessary—maybe once a month, or every couple months—there are what are known as "councils of the councils," where all the different base councils come together, along with the organizing junta, and they meet about the problems they have. After those meetings, the people from the base councils go back to their own communities and report about the "councils of the councils" to all the CIPO members.

NEA: Who is on the organizing junta?

The organizing junta is made up of one or two delegates from each community, so it's 30 or more compañeros. Their post as delegate lasts three years…. They deal with problems in the communities, because all of them have many problems. And sometimes they go as delegates to other countries, when they're invited.

The organizing junta are there on their own accord—they do their work voluntarily. They don't receive pay for their work. To provide for this, there is mutual aid: while the people participate in the junta, there are people who take care of their land, and we take up collections to provide for their expenses….

NEA: We've heard about the tequio, and that it's used for both collective projects and as a sentence for when people do something wrong. How does that work?

The community elects one person for a year who will be in charge of checking out what needs to be done, like if the road has to be repaired.

An example of the tequio is when everyone joins together to harvest the corn, or the beans. So they harvest it together, and they sell it. The money that they get for it, they use to pay for the electricity and other things. It helps us to buy pencils, and white paper to use on the computer, for example.

And regarding the sentences for infractions, in our communities, there aren't murderers. Among the worst things that

the driver's license, because they don't have the papers to be here.

And… wages are really low, and so you end up working a lot for very little money. So it's the same thing, here or there. The organization supports the workers. It explains to us what the effects of pesticides are, and contaminants, and things like that. They also hold talks on the land, about sexually transmitted diseases, about AIDS. They're asking the US government to give out cards that will allow immigrant workers to have driver's licenses.

NEA: Are the other people in the US from the CIPO organizing at the farms they work on?

Well, it's difficult, because many of us work different hours, and some of us work 12 hours a day, and we only work 6 months a year, so it's hard to get together. Some get up earlier, some later, so it's hard to get on the phone to say hello.

We continue talking with other people about what's going on with us, through CIPO-RFM, and also because our experiences are very similar to the experiences of others. It all seems to be similar from North to South.

It's the same in all the states. They have the same problems with Immigration, and police… If any of us get sick, we have bad experiences with doctors in the hospitals. They don't understand us, and they don't attend to us like human beings. There are good-hearted people here who help us, and drive us to the doctors, and explain how things work, as we don't speak English. But it depends on luck. Not everyone is like that.

NEA: What are the next things that you would wish, or hope, to see happen in the US?

There's a lot I'd like to see happen, but there are a lot of people here! I couldn't really answer that question, because there's so many people from different countries, it's not just Mexicans here.

NEA: For Mexicans, then…

To cross you have to walk 2, 3, 4 days, or 5 nights…. Entering Arizona is sad too. There's a house that the coyotes have…. a tiny house, very hot, where there is little food. And crossing all the way from the border to get there, you always travel worried, or cautious. We came and got picked up by a car or van. Then we had to crouch really low, or sometimes be on our side for a really long time.

NEA: What was it like getting to the East Coast?

We didn't know anyone, no one to ask for even a little bit of money. It's hard. But God is very great in that way. He helps us a lot, helps the immigrants… We arrived at a field, we stayed in a house. Even though it was cold, there was no other option.

And the other compañeros, the ones who have bad luck, are arrested by Immigration, and jailed. They're sent back to Mexico. They take their fingerprints as though they're criminals.

Other compañeros, when they're detained, when they arrive at the Mexican border, they have to answer all these questions, like "what did you go there for?" "What did you want to do over there?" They always make fools out of them. They know well, but they always ask…. "Who's your guide?" Always with bad language…. "Go back to your village, you got nothing to do here."

NEA: I want to ask you about your experience being politically active here in the United States. What are you involved in, and what's your impression of the immigrant movement, and other struggles, in the United States?

I'd almost like to think that here you could make a better life, but that's not true. We're suffering the same in the field from the chemicals, the pesticides… that affects us a lot. I got involved with another organization…

In many states, there is the problem of detentions—the police are detaining immigrants without any crime committed. The police come and ask us for a lot of different documents that they know we don't have… [they] ask the person to show their papers, or their driver's license, but that person doesn't have

happen in our communities are that someone might use violence against women, to assault another member of the community. And when this happens, we lock up the person, and sometimes we make them pay for their crimes in money. There are houses that work as jails, and they're made out of adobe or stone. They stay there for 24 hours, or they're asked to pay a small fine…

There's the example of a Zapoteco community, in which the sentencing for wrongdoing, like for hitting a member, is to work on the tequio. Sometimes it's for a week.

NEA: And who decides how much time that person is going to be working on the tequio?

The people. The community. As it is a custom; you have to respect the custom of the community. So in this community, the example was given, the community decides how long the person will be working on the tequio for that sentence. In my community, we have the jail that people have to stay in for 24 hours. In other communities, sometimes they have to work in the tequio, and that might be to help build a road, or to take care of the cows, or bulls, or goats….

NEA: Are the people who founded the CIPO still active in the organization?

They're still around, and they help with training other members, things like teaching them how to read and write. Through different types of skills, like making flyers or pamphlets, asking them questions, telling them stories…

I just finished my 3 years on the organizing committee, helping to raise a little bit of money for them to use in the CIPO house. Because the government doesn't give—we don't ask the government for any money, because we know that among brothers we can accomplish what we need to accomplish. We only ask that the government fix the problems they've caused….

NEA: Can you tell us a little more about the CIPO House?

The CIPO House is a house of the indigenous peoples, who through their struggle have given bits of the materials that they have. Some give things like cement, gravel, sand, and other materials that are necessary to build the house… We're close, but it's not completely finished. This house is a tequio, a voluntary tequio without any pay… we're dreaming of having a large house with a very large yard so that we can live together with people from other countries, so that the house will be for everyone.

The organizing junta is there. And every week two different members of different communities come to guard the House. They answer the phone, and take messages, and they receive the guests who come to visit the House. They also cook the food that is offered to visitors. When the week ends, two new [guards] arrive…

NEA: Tell us more about your work on the organizing junta.

My work on the organizing junta involved going to the different communities and visiting compañeros, and doing different tequios, or just going to see what's happening… It's part of our work to go to the communities and have small discussions, to talk about what's going on in Oaxaca, and if there have been any improvements, or there have been advances, or no advances, or problems.

The work of the organizing junta is also to go and train compañeros, teach them other kinds of work…. We don't explain by going and carrying papers, because the people, they haven't studied… it's difficult for them to understand. What the junta does is capacity-building, from children to—it doesn't matter the age. We have games to make people understand, explaining using large drawings…

Aside from that, if a compañero arrives from another country, the junta has to talk to the community, tell them that the person is going to arrive, because if they don't have authorization, they can't come to the communities…. or, they can come in, but no one's going to pay attention to them.

We have to give the name of the foreign person, so that they know who he is, what he's about, and then he'll be welcomed in warmly. Sometimes people come to do projects with the community. For example, a Spanish woman taught people in Plan de Zaragoza to do bakery work.

NEA: Are many non-indigenous people involved in the CIPO?

Well, in the CIPO house we're all equal. We don't put any compañero aside. Indigenous or not indigenous, people of different religions—Catholics, Evangelicals, others—all of us are equal. We don't make distinctions. We're all brothers and sisters. The non-indigenous treat us well, just as we treat them well.

NEA: Can you tell us about your experience coming to the United States?

Well, necessity obliged me to come here. Many other members of the Indigenous Council have immigrated to the US. Crossing the border is very risky, because Immigration is on the borders. As necessity obliges us, we cross, come what may.

Crossing the border is very sad, because you suffer thorns on your skin, and because you don't have enough food. There's no water. In Mexico there is no work—or there's work, but very little, very low paid: ten dollars for a whole day. That's why we go, out of obligation we cross the border. We know it's dangerous…

Sometimes we stop at ponds where cows drink, and even though they're really dirty, we drink from there, because we have no other place to drink from. To CROSS the border is to CROSS with fear. Whenever you see something, you have to hide under the bushes. In the desert it's hard to find brush to get under.