

# **A community in arms**

**The Indigenous roots of the EZLN**

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On January 1, 1994, several thousand Indigenous Mayan people, organized as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), rose up in Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state, and took the world by surprise. They were members of the 21 or so ethnic groups who occupied the areas in and around the Lacandon forest near the border with Guatemala. Their weapons were limited to rifles — and some of the rebels carried only wooden replicas. They seized government offices and occupied thousands of acres of private land while briefly taking control of the city of San Cristobal de las Casas and six Chiapas towns.

After 12 days of confrontation with the Mexican army, the rebellion was contained. President Salinas realized that he could not simply go in and smash the Zapatistas. The massive Mexican and global militant mobilization forced the government to declare a unilateral ceasefire and choose another tactic, that of a fake political dialogue while continuing the war in other forms: frequent attacks, massacres and dispossessions.

For their part, the EZLN agreed. Once they achieved the aim of the uprising — making the Indigenous voices heard — they laid down their arms and entered the so-called “peace talks” suggested by the government, while continuing to build the non-hierarchical, “horizontal” political and social system of Chiapas.

Subcomandante Marcos elaborated on the aim of the uprising as “breaking the deliberate silencing regarding the Global South which had been unheard, ignored.” Indeed, “Never again a Mexico without us” is one of the slogans marking the ideological essence of the EZLN. The Indigenous people in Chiapas were unknown, unimportant and forgotten, left by the wayside for hunger and disease to finish them off. This is why the Zapatista uprising of 1994 is often referred to as “a war against oblivion.”

“This oblivion was never and still isn't an accidental one,” says Marcos; “it is a deliberate product of racism and colonialism, both external and internal, which devalues the life and the suffering of the people of the Global South to the extent that they often do not exist for the rest of the world.” The aim was not to seize state power: “You cannot impose a political system by force. The political system cannot be the product of war. The war should only be to open up space in the political arena so that the people can really have a choice.”

In order to put the short-term uprising in the context of the continued struggle for autonomous democracy from below, this essay will first discuss the history of the militant resistance of the Indigenous communities before their meeting with the EZLN. Then proceed to its creation as the military arm of the Chiapas communities, who always maintained the dominant role in sharing with the EZLN the project of building an autonomous Chiapas. As mentioned above, the 1994 uprising took place in the midst of the ongoing development of this project, which has continued all the way up to the present moment.

## **The foundation of the EZLN**

The EZLN was officially founded on November 17, 1983, the day a small group of men and women — three Indigenous and three mestizos — landed in the mountains of the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas. They represented a group, some of whom had in the past been members of Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional (FLN), a guerrilla organization founded in 1969. Its statutes of 1980 describe the organization as “a political-military Marxist-Leninist organization whose aim was taking political power by the workers in order to install a popular republic with a socialist system.”

The EZLN was born out of the FLN and was originally planned to form the armed wing of this clandestine organization which by the end of the 1970s was one of the last remaining leftist guerrilla factions.

Marcos made sure to distinguish the EZLN from the other Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movements who strived to occupy state power. When asked, “Are there lessons you learned from the Cuban revolution?” Marcos responded: “Well I don’t know if you can call them lessons, because we did not take Cuba as our frame of reference. But we learned that you can’t impose forms of politics on the people because sooner or later you will end up doing the same things you criticize. You criticize a totalitarian system and then offer another totalitarian regime. You can’t impose a political system by force.”

Pointing to the essential difference between “the guerrilla movements of the fifties, sixties, and seventies and those of today,” he emphasizes: “Before, they said: ‘Let’s get rid of this system of government and put in this other kind of system.’ We say, ‘No, the political system can’t be the product of a war.’ The war should be only to open up space in the political arena so that the people can really have a choice.”

## **Becoming a “community in arms”**

Marcos argues rightly that whatever the previous political theories and inclinations of the FLN may have been, the real question is: What was the process that led to the *fusion* of the newly established EZLN *with* the Indigenous community? The real issue, then, is their transformation from a guerrilla group to “a community in arms.”

The EZLN soon understood that none of the existing theories and strategies claimed by the different trends of the traditional Marxist guerrilla organizations would apply to the conditions they met in Chiapas. Indeed, the contact of the EZLN with the Indigenous communities led to a kind of conversion of the original group, a process that Marcos describes as follows:

We really suffered a process of re-education, of restyling. As if they had disarmed us. As if they had dismantled all we were made up of — Marxism, Leninism, socialism, urban culture, poetry, literature — all that formed part of us, and things we did not even know we had. They disarmed us and then armed us again, but in a different way. And that was the only way to survive... the work that the guerrilla nucleus of the FLN developed in Chiapas could only mature and become the EZLN through the *cosmovision* and tradition of resistance of different Indigenous groups.

Finding themselves lacking a political doctrine that could designate exact goals for their aspired “revolution,” lacking a plan for mobilizing the Indigenous communities to support them — all this increased the EZLN’s humility before the rich tradition of Indigenous resistance that was being conferred to them.

Marcos is quoted as saying “I think that our only virtue as theorists was to have the humility to recognize that our theoretical scheme did not work, that it was very limited, that we had to adapt ourselves to the reality that was being imposed on us.” With time, however, their “humility” developed into the central notions of the Zapatistas’ forms of social organization: “To lead by

obeying” (*mandar obedeciendo*) and “We walk asking questions” (*preguntando caminamos*). By definition, these strategies exclude the possibility of pre-defining a path or point of arrival.

In a letter written in 1995, Marcos tells of the many changes the EZLN had gone through: “We did not propose it. The only thing that we proposed to do was to change the world; everything else has been improvisation.” However, as John Holloway quotes Marcos: “We had to adapt ourselves to the reality that was being imposed on us...But the result was not that reality imposed itself on theory, as some argue, but that the confrontation with reality gave rise to a whole new and immensely rich theorization of revolutionary practice.”

Following their first encampment, the newly-created EZLN gradually made contact with the local communities, initially through family contacts. Then, from about 1985 onwards, more and more of the communities sought out the Zapatistas to help them defend themselves from the police or the farmers’ armed “white guards”. Ever increasing numbers joined the military wing of the EZLN, on a full-time basis, or forming part of the part-time militia.

Meanwhile, the rest of the community was providing material support to the insurgents. The members of the EZLN received daily supplies of food, aid and information from their families and friends, who continued on with the daily activities of farming, hunting and gathering, artisanal and waged labor through which the communities survived and thus became Zapatista communities.

## **Inspired by Indigenous traditions of militancy**

The Mexican Revolution (1910–1917), led by Emilio Zapata, had served as a powerful inspiration for the EZLN and the Indigenous communities in Mexico, as well as for other kindred social movements in Latin America: “We are the product of 500 years of struggle ... but today we say *Ya Basta!* Enough is enough,” announced the first *communiqué*. It thus emphasized the continuities among interrelated struggles for the redistribution of lands, for communal ownership, and for a radical democratization of the political system.

The EZLN drew especially on the Chiapas communities’ traditions of self-organization, their continuous struggle against dispossession and oppression during the 20 years prior to the arrival of EZLN members in 1983.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, peasant unions and other grassroots organizations received support from outreach activities of the Catholic diocese under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruíz and other Catholic catechists informed by the concepts of liberation theology. These extensive grassroots efforts culminated in 1974, with the First Indigenous Congress.

In accord with its community-based approach, the church saw the congress as a means of giving voice to Indigenous communities, encouraging them to select their own delegates and conceptualize the problems that confronted them. These concerns included the aggressive encroachment of the big cattle estates onto communal land, the corruption of government officials and their involvement with the big landowners, and the absence of labor rights for plantation workers, as well as scarcity regarding food, education and health.

The 1974 congress and resistance organizations, which appeared in Chiapas shortly afterwards, reflected the high level of political consciousness and militancy of the Indigenous communities before the Zapatistas’ arrival. As Judith Adler Hellman emphasizes, these organizations “demon-

strated so clearly the capacity of Indigenous people to come together across ethnic and linguistic lines and to grasp and articulate their own grievances.”

It was the mass dislocation of whole communities that opened the way to the Chiapas communities’ support for the new EZLN. Facing continuing pressure for land reform, but unwilling to undercut the power of local rural elites, the government opened up uncultivated forests to colonization. As a result, immigrants from various parts of Chiapas and elsewhere in Mexico carved new farmlands and new communities out of the forests.

However these lands were unfit for farming. Hence, as H.M. Cleaver notes, “it was often in these new communities of land-starved *campesinos*, that peasant self-organization and sympathy for the Zapatista movement thrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s.”

## **The pre-’94 decade of Indigenous organizing**

During the ten years prior to the uprising, a unique relationship between the EZLN and the Indigenous communities was gradually established. The slogan “to lead by obeying” portrayed the real nature of the relationship – one in which the communities played a leading role.

The Zapatistas rightly claimed that the EZLN differed in this respect from the classic guerrilla movements in which Indigenous people were militarized and organized by external groups who aimed to mobilize them to a military insurgence seizing state power. Cleaver, who already in 1994 knew Chiapas closely, emphasized that portraying the Indigenous as victims who have been monopolized is wrong: “This important distinction,” he adds, “has been reiterated again and again by the EZLN.”

The EZLN in their methods and politics have been entirely different from those of Che Guevara, whom they adored as a symbol of heroism and bravery shared among the majority of Latin America people: “Che went to Bolivia and remained isolated till he was killed. Marcos, on the other hand, went to Chiapas, was absorbed by the communities and remade as their spokesperson and intermediary to the world.”

The EZLN’s supreme command was composed of an elected membership that reflected the full spectrum of communities and ethnicities; it transformed into the indigenous communities’ military arm: “leading by obeying” (*mandar obedeciendo*).

Marcos rejects the idea that the EZLN began organizing for the armed struggle from the moment of their very first encampment in Chiapas. He emphasizes the fact that the community defined their role as one of “self-defense” – namely, the protection of the Mayans against the cattle ranchers’ armed security forces: “When we first came here, we talked about the issue of armed struggle. And the Indigenous people said, ‘Yes, we have to take up arms to defend ourselves.’ So we began to train in the mountains for self-defense, not for how to attack. That is how the Zapatista National Army was born. Our objective in training in the mountains has been to protect the villagers.” But at the same time, “we gathered our force in silence and prepared well military and politically for the right time to attack.”

This took place while both oppression and resistance had been escalating all across Mexico, but specifically in Chiapas. Between 1989 and 1990, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) governor of Chiapas embarked on a repressive campaign while simultaneously appropriating communal lands and small farms for absorption into the big agricultural estates.

It was the catastrophic cancellation of Article 27 that brought about the decision to take up arms. On November 7, 1991 President Carlos Salinas de Gortari formally proposed to Mexico's federal legislature that Article 27 of the constitution would be erased. The final confirmation was due to take place on January 1, 1994. It spelled the official end of the promised program of land distribution and the right to communal ownership. It also guaranteed the removal of all tariff barriers and restrictions on foreign investment, even for state procurement.

Multinational corporations could thus encroach further and further onto lands previously given to subsistence agriculture food production, using them for the cultivation of export crops with advanced technologies. At the same time, the much cheaper food imports from the United States — maize in particular — undermined that area of agriculture. Now oil production was also opened to foreign companies. It aimed at paving the way for mass transfer of land from Indigenous communities to multinational corporations.

All this was part of a radical restructuring of the Mexican economy in order to attract foreign investment and secure the NAFTA trade deal.

The Zapatista communities themselves ordered their army to take action, as a last ditch effort to stave off what seemed like more or less imminent annihilation. As confirmed by Marcos, it was the Indigenous communities who pushed for the insurrection:

They the [Indigenous communities] told me to start the war because I was the one in charge of military planning. I said that we couldn't, that we weren't ready. I said that we needed time, because all of our training was for defense, while they now wanted to attack the cities. So I asked them for more time to organize. On January of 1993, they said they would give me one year to make the arrangements. 'If you don't do it in a year, we'll do it without you,' they said. They told me that the latest date was December 31, 1993. It had to be some-time between January and December. So in 1993 we had to readjust our entirely military system to organize for the offensive.

The decision to take up arms remained almost entirely secret until January 1, 1994. But the three years leading up to 1991 had already been used by the community for increased organized resistance. In 1991, Mexican Indigenous communities joined the Latin American movement that had launched militant demonstrations to commemorate the 500 years of resistance since the landing of Christopher Columbus in the Americas.

On March 12 of that year, after a two-week-long march from their jungle hideout, the Zapatista rally drew around 100,000 supporters who filled the city square, where Subcomandante Marcos proclaimed, "We are here to demand democracy, liberty and justice. The militant demonstrations and their harsh repressions continued up through 1992.

In March of that year, the violent repression of a meeting of Indigenous organizations provoked a six-week-long march by 400 people from Chiapas to Mexico City. In July, a group of women from Ecatepec, on the Western border of Chiapas, staged a sit-in protest in central Mexico City. On October 12, about 10,000 Indigenous people marched through San Cristobal. Other protests in Chiapas were broken up by armed gangs. Communal rights were ignored and the movement's leaders snatched and imprisoned.

The proposal to start the uprising on January 1994 "was passed to all the communities," says Marcos. "Everyone was asked what they thought. Then there was a direct vote. It was the same when the government proposed the ceasefire and started the peace talks. You have to go to every

one of these communities because those who decided the war have to decide if it will stop. All military orders,” he added, “emerge from this.”

The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas took place amidst a militant resistance throughout the rest of Mexico. The Saturday following the uprising saw a crowd of 50,000 demonstrators in Mexico City’s main square. On the anniversary of the assassination of revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata even larger crowds marched through the city, attracting peasant and Indigenous organizations from all over the country.

## **Chiapas, Mexico and Latin America: Anti-capitalist radicalism**

Coincidentally, the Zapatista uprising broke out on the day that the NAFTA agreement was confirmed. It represented symbolically the deep rooted anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism that Chiapas shared “with other Indigenous people in Mexico and throughout Latin America,” as Cleaver points out. It was an outcry against capitalism as such, and not only against the specific forms prominent in the era of economic neo-liberalism, or against its effect upon Indigenous people only.

At the same time, they understood well enough its disastrous potential for themselves who were the first target of the policies of dispossession.

The understanding of the aim of capitalism as eliminating Indigenous resistance and communal life is presented in a letter Subcomandante Marcos addressed to author and supporter John Berger on December, 1994, less than one month before the uprising:

Neoliberalism disguises itself as the defense of a sovereignty which has been sold in dollars on the international market.... These Indigenous people irritate the modernizing logic of neo-mercantilism. Their rebellion, their defiance, their resistance, irritates them. The anachronism of their existence within a project of globalization, an economic and political project that, soon, will decide that poor people, all the people in opposition, which is to say, the majority of the population, are obstacles.

A most valuable source for learning first-hand about the political radicalism of the Chiapas people and their leaders at the time of the uprising is Augusta Dwyer’s interview with leading Indigenous militants on behalf of *Socialist Review (SWP Britain)*. In the interview, which took place just a few months after the January uprising, the militants express their total commitment to a war against capitalism and its manifestations in expressions of economic neoliberalism like NAFTA.

They quote Marcos as saying over a captured radio station in January: “The free-trade agreement is a death certificate for the Indian peoples of Mexico, who are dispensable for the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. We rise up in arms against this sentence.”

The interviewed Indigenous activists emphasize the false consciousness shared by the working class, who by and large have accepted misleading ideologies and fake promises regarding the capitalist system. Hence, “the enormous challenge the uprising presents to the government’s carefully woven web of repression and deceit and the refusal to accept such conditions any longer, should be an inspiration to *socialists* everywhere.”



They argue that they are not only an “Indigenous”, “ethnic” movement. Their goals and strategies are addressed to the “working class and all the repressed,” while at the same time emphasizing the most brutal oppression of Chiapas and other Indigenous communities in Mexico and Latin America: the “land distribution is heavily weighted towards rich and powerful ranchers, a centuries old tradition of discrimination against Indigenous people and blatant poverty for the vast majority.”

By the same token, their demands aimed at the government were not limited to the Indigenous people alone: “The Zapatista demands of land, decent housing, schools, health clinics, decent salaries, equality, liberty, justice, clean elections and a transitional government [are] simple yet revolutionary.” They “expose the vast chasm between rich and poor, the wage controls that make the Mexican worker among the lowest paid in the world, as well as the corruption and hypocrisy that are hallmarks of the party that has monopolized power for decades.”

## **Resisting and building, during the negotiation years**

The decade after the 1994 uprising bore witness to an intermittently deceiving dialogue between the EZLN and the Federal government. The Zapatistas demanded full autonomy for Chiapas, land rights in other parts of the country and the demolition of NAFTA and other neoliberal policies, as well as demanding democratic rights for all Mexican citizens. But the demands were not meant to be confined to Mexico alone.

The First Intercontinental Encounter in 1996, organized by the Zapatistas, convoked over 3,000 activists from over 400 countries to come together and discuss, among themselves, the nature of neoliberalism and of the struggles against it. Out of this was created the National Indigenous Congress which, during the negotiation years, was consulted about introducing changes to the constitution that would significantly improve the Indigenous situation.

Meanwhile, the Latin American movement for solidarity with Chiapas was growing. This movement played a central role in the enduring support for the Zapatistas, defending them from the incessant attacks by the Mexican army and allowing them to continue their autonomous egalitarian project. The attacks by the Mexican army would continue for years to come, persisting all the way up to the present day, with almost no mention in the Western press.

Following nearly a decade of fake negotiations with the State, the inevitable breakdown took place. On January 1, 2003 the Zapatistas of Chiapas decided to “abandon the politics of demands, and with it, all contact with the state.” Instead, they chose to concentrate on building their own autonomous, horizontal forms of self-government within their own territories and by their own means.

On August 9 of that year, the Zapatistas announced the establishment of the Good Government Councils (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*), each based in one of the *caracoles*, or administrative centers of the rebel zones. A total of five *caracoles* were created, each with their own Good Government Council, and each responsible for its own Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipality (MAREZ).

Each *caracol* includes three levels of autonomous government: the community, the municipality and the Council of Good Government. The first two are based on grassroots participatory assemblies. The decisions reached by each of the five Councils of Good Government are based on guidelines previously determined on the community level. The council members are elected,

but with the intention to get as many people as possible to participate in them over the years through a principle of rotation.

Each *caracol* contains its own education, healthcare and justice systems, as well as cooperatives producing coffee, creating handicrafts and rearing cattle, among other things. All decisions are committed according to guidelines previously determined by the participatory assemblies on the community level – “a revolutionary model for organizing and self-government,” according to the Chiapas Support Committee (CSC), an organization based in Oakland, California.

## **Emancipation and dignity of women in the rebel caracoles**

The challenge of equality for women found support and acceptance from the EZLN and its leaders. The takeover of San Cristobal de las Casas, the most important city occupied by the EZLN during the 1994 uprising, was headed by Major Ana Maria, and other leading figure in the movement was Comandante Ramona, who was the first Zapatista to be sent to Mexico City to represent the movement in negotiations with the government.

Women have been 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 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.

This “Women’s Revolutionary 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.” This included 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...not [be] 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.”

Today women participate at all levels of government and run their own cooperatives and economic structures to guarantee their economic independence. They form a large part of the ranks of the EZLN and take high positions in its military command. As González Casanova points out: “It’s fair to recognize that the JBG and its likenesses are both government and a school of government. They opened central participation to women and youth, and made community public service horizontal without anything to do with the political parties or the dominant system.”

Faced with the neoliberal policies that established dispossession and aggressive extraction of resources from their territories, the rebel *caracoles* have been functioning slowly, quietly and efficiently for more than two decades. Its strategy went further and deeper, and embodied a culture that the State was obliged to respect.

Thus, on February 24, 2016, a federal judge in Mexico admitted that he had no choice but to accept that the State’s case against the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (ELZN) *could not move forward*. The charges of terrorism, sedition, riot, rebellion, and conspiracy filed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1994 against Insurgent Subcomandante Marcos and the Indigenous leaders of the resistance were null and void: the statute of limitations had expired.

González Casanova's conclusions were broad in scope: "More than an ideology of the power of peoples-governments, the *caracoles* construct and express a culture of power that issues from five hundred years of resistance of the Indian peoples of America." The Chiapas *caracoles* are at the center of an Indigenous movement across Latin America.

## Mexico and Latin America

The Zapatistas of Chiapas did not appear out of nowhere but rather arose within a region of Indigenous social movements fighting for land and against racism and discrimination that had been active since the 1970s, more than a decade before the EZLN became part of the Chiapas resistance movement. The Zapatistas were first inspired by their resolute militancy, and with time became a model for them in turn.

Striving to strengthen the unified Indigenous struggle, the Mayan people of Chiapas were developing networks of cooperation and joint struggle with other Mexican communities for the return of stolen lands, education and clean water among other needs, against the mass oppression committed by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the service of multi-national monopolies.

In Mexico and throughout Latin America, Indigenous communities have been exposed to the onslaught of drug trafficking, criminal gangs, the private security guards of multinational corporations, as well as to state security forces such as the police and the army. The Indigenous leaders of organized resistance have often been assassinated, in an effort to remove any obstacles to achieving the projects of plunder in their territories.

Interestingly, the Latin American Indigenous movements were hardly hit by the downfall of the center-left "pink tide" governments between 2000 and 2005, which in a way permitted even more radical resistance. The movements have persisted in building their communities, in ways that are continually adapting to the changing requirements for defense against the daily slaughters inflicted upon them.

Some of the most affected communities have founded a guard system that is subservient to the people, developing communal power structures in parallel to the state but operating quite differently from state power. As emphasized above, the role of the EZLN was largely that of a defensive military force until the Indigenous communities' own decision to take up arms.

Other communities in Latin America have adopted the political culture synthesized by the Zapatistas in the expression "leading by obeying" (*mandar obedeciendo*). These systems have been anchored in community practices which are to be distinguished even from left-wing parties and unions, since the latter "are always marked by an underlying temptation to become a new power, constructed in the image of the state," as Raúl Zibechi writes.

In contradistinction to those forms, the structure of these Indigenous guards in the communities have been founded on principles similar to those underlying the Chiapas' *caracoles* — they aim to keep community members as the ultimate decision makers, who exercise power by controlling their chosen representatives. Each community assembly chooses ten guards and a coordinator. A second coordinator is then chosen Clandestine Regional Committee, and a third by the Good Government Councils.

The North Cauca region in Colombia, for example, has 3,500 Indigenous Guards, corresponding to local government council. Participation in the defense groups is voluntary and unpaid, and the

authorities and neighbors in each community help with the upkeep of the family plot of each guard and sometimes carry out sowing and harvest work.

“These practices and procedures,” says Zibechei “aim at avoiding making the mistake of ascribing power to institutions that are effectively cogs in the state machinery” and prevent any kind of grassroots autonomy or decision-making. Indeed, the failing Communal Councils of Venezuela demonstrate the consequences of such a mistake: due to their dependence on state funding, the Councils form part of the organizational structure of the state and help to secure it rather than transcending it.

Over time, they have become increasingly homogeneous and lost their independence. Although there is a strong egalitarian culture in the popular neighborhoods in Venezuela, a culture of horizontality and the absence of hierarchy, the contradiction between the base and the leadership has been resolved through directives that set limits to and control egalitarian spaces.

Many other cases indicate that the intervention of governments, even through “well-meaning” social services and “development projects” has resulted in loss of community independence. On the other hand, there are counter-trends, such as the *Guardia Indígena*, the heart of power for the Nasa people who have been at the forefront of the Indigenous movement in Colombia.

Zibechei depicts the Zapatista Chiapas as an outstanding example of a fully horizontal social system. The *caracoles* are “the only case in Latin America where autonomy and self-government are expressed at three different levels with the same logic of assembly and rotation as in the community.” The Zapatista model of democracy from beneath remains alive and kicking to this very day. Rightly, they attribute their success to the fact that from the start they were determined to keep a complete disconnection from the state and its institutions, including parties on the Mexican left that supported neoliberal governments.

## **Beyond the Marxist Framework**

Chiapas and most of the Indigenous movements in Latin America have been at the forefront of the world revolutionary struggle against capitalism in its current form of “accumulation by dispossession.” These movements have been a response to a different type of “exploitation” than that of the working class, which is associated with the surplus value produced by labor.

Here we are witness to entire Indigenous communities who are the targets of extraction. They are the victims of daily massacres committed by their “direct employers” – the extractive industries and the drug gangs whom the local pro-imperialist governments have supported. The need for a constant defense of their lives and lands has grown the communal power embodied in the *caracoles* and the social system of democracy from beneath, rooted in the Indigenous’ tradition.

The Indigenous movements have been a courageous means of confronting the total war declared against them. They continue to serve as a strong resource for mobilizing the continual, determined resistance they have been leading against economic neoliberalism.

The Zapatistas, who became one with the Chiapas communities, were not similar to the guerrilla movements who brought from the outside a version of Marxism, which they attempted to instruct to the people by supervising its implementation from above. Those guerrilla movements aimed to change the existing social and political system by occupying state power in a distant-future revolution led by the workers party.

Instead, the Indigenous Zapatistas have combined self-defense with a resolute resistance, which, together with the Latin American struggle, may create cracks in the capitalist system.

Various Marxist Left tendencies have often focused on the short military uprising of 1994 in Chiapas, but have not engaged the Zapatista movement much beyond commemorating this date. They hardly have related to the years before and after it. Nor have they seen them as constituting a unified project — years of resisting while at the same time building up autonomous Chiapas.

The project in Chiapas of “democracy from below,” the horizontal system of community decision making, has not been recognized as a “revolutionary” struggle against capitalism. Neither has the daily resistance demonstrated by the Indigenous movements throughout Latin America, and their attempts to follow Chiapas in building the *caracoles*, been recognized as revolutionary.

The Indigenous resistance movements use the immediate and only armor they have: The wise strategies of autonomous “democracy from below,” and community cohesion. It is a fight for their very lives as individuals and communities, while targeting directly the strongholds of capitalism and imperialism — the world multinationals, and especially the extractive industries supported by the US. This makes them admirable brothers and sisters in our shared struggle, who deserve much more than sheer solidarity.

*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 activists group, Queensland, 1970

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