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The Mexican Zapatistas and direct democracy

Andrew Flood

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On January 1st 1994, a rebel army called the Emiliano Zapata Liberation Front (EZLN) rose against the Mexican government in Chiapas, Mexico. Workers Solidarity contributor Andrew Flood has been researching the life of ordinary people in the Zapatista area. Below he writes about some of his findings

Much of the discussion around the Zapatistas has focused on their communiqués and essentially divides into two camps, one that sees them offering a new model of revolutionary organisation, the other that criticises them on the basis of problems with their political program. However, little has been written about day-to-day life in the rebel area, so when an opportunity arose to travel there in the summer of 1996 I took it. Since then I have interviewed people who have worked with Zapatista communities. In September 1997, I also paid a brief visit to the community of Diez de Abril, where the Irish Mexico Group has a peace camp.

Diez de Abril is situated between the towns of Altamirano and Comitan. It is on a ranch occupied in 1995. About 100 families

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live there. 80% of the people in Diez are Tzeltal, the other 20% are Tojolobal. Many people only speak one of these languages and little or no Spanish. As elsewhere in Chiapas, conditions are harsh due to poverty, with little education, a lot of ill health and a high death rate for children as a result. There is no sanitation in the community, except the latrines they constructed themselves and there is no access to clean water.

Diez was occupied on 10th April, 1995. As a community delegate explained

“we had to move onto the ranchers’ land because we were living like animals in the hills. The land there was very bad, and difficult to harvest...The majority of the community voted to call the village Diez De Abril. They chose that name because it honoured Zapata who was killed on that date. He was a companero, fighting against the government.”

“We used to meet where the church is now, and there decided where to put the houses, and to give a house to the international observers. We measured the land and divided it up among the people. Each family has a plot of land of their own and then there are also collectives.”

The church in Diez is the main assembly point for the community and all the people of the community meet there once a week — after mass on Sunday morning. These village assemblies, at which everyone may speak and everyone has a vote, decide all questions that face the community, from whether to buy a lorry or a tractor to how the repair of the fences or the bridge will be done.

Sometimes it is necessary for more than one assembly in a week, particularly at times of high tension. In addition there are several sub-assemblies of the people that work on particular projects in the community. Two examples are the cattle collective and the sewing

collective. Each collective has a co-ordinator, a secretary and a treasurer. The co-ordinator is changed at least once a year.

The main assembly may also appoint delegates to co-ordinate particular tasks, and with the co-ordinators of the collectives, they form a council which meets between assemblies and organises the work. All of these delegates are recallable if the assembly or their collective is unhappy with them.

From what we are told, a similar decision making structure works in other Zapatista communities and, in addition, communities send delegates to regional meetings. The Zapatista zone has around 32 rebel municipalities that refuse to recognise the Mexican or local state government. These municipalities send delegates to the council that organises the rebellion, the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee (CCRI). According to interviews with its members, these delegates are also recallable “if some member of the CCRI does not do their work, if they do not respect the people”. It is this body that leads the Zapatistas rather than the rebel army or its commander, Subcomandante Marcos.

The Zapatistas are involved with a Peace Process. But in this process not even the CCRI can make decisions, instead each document produced by the talks, or any proposed change in tactics, must first be decided by all the communities. In June of 1994 a communiqué explained that the decision to enter talks had been made in each community after “the study, analysis, and discussion of the peace accords took place in democratic assemblies. The voting was direct, free, and democratic.”

This account can only be a brief summary of the methods the Zapatistas use to make decisions, one which cannot discuss the problems they face in doing so. Right now some tens of thousands of people are making decisions in this way, and have been doing so for the last four years in the most difficult of circumstances. This demonstrates that the similar methods of democratic decision making, which anarchists advocate everywhere, are not only practical,

but offer an alternative way to organise than forever hoping to get a few good men elected to the Dáil or Assembly.