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# Occupy Movement, the Zapatista's and the General Assemblies

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Assemblies

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certainly true that if they were to start to do this in Mexico their suggestions would almost certainly create a debate in which those who already agree with their method in the cities could organise.

The power of the Zapatistas is the power of example. Their methods of organisation are radically different from what has become the norm in trade unions, community organisations and left groups. Their rejection of seizing power is radically different from the project of much of the left, a project that sees revolutionary action more in terms of paper selling and 'voting left with no illusions' than ordinary people taking power into their own hands.

In holding the Zapatistas up as an example we must also point out the need to go beyond the point they have reached. Our solidarity with them must remain critical, in particular of the points they have yet to make clear or perhaps even decide on. The Zapatistas represent one example of a different way of doing things, not the sole model to be blindly followed.

by Mariana Mora — Apr 1998, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

The General Assemblies of the Occupy movement are creating a global experience in Direct Democracy. But this model did not come from nowhere — among other sources of influence is the Zapatista rebellion of southern Mexico, soon to enter its 18<sup>th</sup> year. Over almost two decades hundreds of rebel communities in Chiapas have used a General Assembly model to decide on how all aspects of life in the liberated zone will be organised. Despite their different circumstances to those faced by the majority of the Occupy camps (in urban built up locations) there is still much that can be learnt from that experience.

This piece written for the Irish Mexico Group by a WSM member a few years after the start of that rebellion looks at how the Zapatistas organise themselves in great detail, what some of the problems they had faced are and how they overcame them. It also looks further into the history of General Assemblies and Direct Democracy in Mexico and around the globe.

The EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) came briefly to the world's attention when they seized several towns in Chiapas on New Year's day in 1994. This image of a new armed rebel movement in the period when such movements were meant to have recognised their own redundancy was startling and demonstrated that history was not yet over.

Since then most of the continued support the Zapatistas have received is strongly based on the idea that the Zapatistas are different. Different not just from the neoliberal world order they oppose but, more fundamentally, different from the armed revolutionary groups that exist and have existed elsewhere in the world.

Those involved internationally in Zapatista solidarity work are drawn to it not because they believe Mexico is uniquely repressive. There are many countries that are far worse, Columbia being one obvious example. They hope there is something in the Zapatista method that they can take home

to their own city or region. Hence the popularity of the call from the EZLN to 'be a Zapatista wherever you are'.

So although the Zapatistas remain isolated in the jungles and mountains of south eastern Mexico their ideas have influenced many activists across the globe. Not least in the round of global days of action against capitalism. One call for these protests actually arose at an international conference in La Realidad, Chiapas in 1996<sup>1</sup> and is part of the reason for the 'anti-capitalist' demonstrations of London J18 And Seattle N30 in 1999 and those that followed in 2000 including A16 Washington and S26 Prague.<sup>2</sup>

On the 1 Jan 1994 we woke from our hangovers to find that a new rebel army had emerged, seemingly from nowhere, in southern Mexico and seized a number of provincial towns. This army, the EZLN, distributed a paper called 'The Mexican Awakener' [*El Despertador Mexicano*].

It contained their declaration of war, a number of revolutionary laws and orders for their army. They said they were fighting for "work, land, shelter, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace."

Nothing unusual about these demands. In the last couple of hundred years there have been thousands of organisations and movements, armed and otherwise that could have summarised their program in a similar way. But the vast majority of these movements saw the implementation of their program occurring when they took power on behalf of the people. This could be in one of two forms, an armed seizure of power like the October revolution of 1917 in Russia or a democratic election like that of 1945 which returned the British labour government.

Although these two movements, the one 'revolutionary' the other 'reformist' are often portrayed as being very different in

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<sup>1</sup> see for instance James Joll, *The Second International*, Ch. The struggle with the anarchists

<sup>2</sup> see *Where do we come from? Where do we go to?* (talk to S26 Prague counter summit), September 2000, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*understanding of global capital, in order to help overcome capital. In this context, and if it is correct that capital cannot now (for at least several generations) be other than neoliberal, then the actual Zapatista practice and strategy are indeed anti-capitalist.*"<sup>51</sup>

It is also not irrelevant that given their Leninist origins the Zapatista leadership have made clear that they consider the failing of the eastern regimes in 1989 was the failure of socialism. They have tended to steer very clear of traditional socialist rhetoric. But it does make you wonder how they could see such a system as socialism when it was so clearly a top down dictatorship. All the more so when as early as 1918 Lenin made no secret the immediate goal of the Bolshevik government was the creation of state capitalism.

## Which leadership?

There are two meanings to the word leadership. The first one is where a person or organisation is put in a position of authority over others and can therefore tell them what to do. This is the sort of leadership exercised by elected politicians. The second which is often confused with the first is where the person or group has no power over others but they are recognised as an 'authority' in a given area and so people are willing to try what they suggest. Anarchists refer to this as being a 'leadership of ideas'. In reality the Zapatistas are already this kind of leadership (whether they want to be or not) not only in Mexico but also elsewhere in the world.

In that context perhaps the Zapatistas need to move from simply supporting the struggles of others to suggesting the ways in which those struggles could be organised and what their goals should be. To some extent they have done this, as for instance in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Declaration of Reality. But it is almost

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<sup>51</sup> *Toward the New Commons: Working Class Strategies and the Zapatistas* by Monty Neill, with George Caffentzis and Johnny Machete

*salaries, humiliations, and threats. The heads of the great central government unions bleed the workers with extortions, beatings, and death. Those who sell the country bleed the workers with the dispatches of usurpation, writing the laws that their treason dictates.*

*Let your voice run together with ours... Accept this hand that your smallest brothers and sisters offer you. Three forces should unite their paths: the force of the workers, the force of the campesinos, the popular force. With these three forces there will be nothing to detain us.*

...

*Receive our voice, which, although far away, says: "Greetings, workers of the sea and of the land! The Zapatistas follow you in their struggles! With you there will be a country and future for all some day! Without you, night will continue to rule these lands!"*<sup>50</sup>

These statements demonstrate that the Zapatistas recognise a common struggle with urban workers in Mexico (and the oppressed everywhere). The fact that have donated considerable resources in holding gatherings for radical students and teachers as well as the American and intercontinental encounters shows they take building such links very seriously.

A very lengthy discussion, from an autonomist Marxist perspective, around these points was published by Midnight Notes as *Toward the New Commons: Working Class Strategies and the Zapatistas*. They "*think the Zapatistas are strategizing how to unite the 80% or more, and doing so in relationship to the existing and historical class composition in Mexico and in light of their*

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<sup>50</sup> CCRI of the EZLN to the Workers of the Republic on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

reality they share an essential feature. The change they proposed was a change of politicians and not a change in the way of doing politics. Both could talk about mobilising the working class in the course of coming to power but once in power they made sure their party ruled alone. And indeed both shared the common source of the '2<sup>nd</sup> International' which differed from the first **because** it choose to exclude those who opposed the taking of state power<sup>3</sup>.

The 'Mexican Awakener' rather than talking of the EZLN seizing power as a new revolutionary government outlined the military objectives of the rising as "*Advance to the capital of the country, overcoming the Mexican federal army, protecting in our advance the civilian population and permitting the people in the liberated area the right to freely and democratically elect their own administrative authorities.*"

Unusually for any revolutionary organisation these laws then defined a right of the people to resist any unjust actions of the EZLN. They defined a right of the people to:

*"demand that the revolutionary armed forces not intervene in matters of civil order or the disposition of capital relating to agriculture, commerce, finances, and industry, as these are the exclusive domain of the civil authorities, elected freely and democratically." And said that the people should "acquire and possess arms to defend their persons, families and property, according to the laws of disposition of capital of farms, commerce, finance and industry, against the armed attacks **committed by the revolutionary forces** or those of the government."*

These sections and other things done and said by the EZLN at the time suggested that there was something in this rebellion

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<sup>3</sup> See The story of how we learnt to dream at Reality, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

that broke what had become the standard model for revolutionary organisation. The traditional model was for the revolutionary organisation to mobilise whatever forces were available to overthrow the existing government and then to form a new government itself. Fundamental to this model, from the Russian revolution of 1917 to the Nicaraguan one of 1979 was the (flawed) assumption that the interests of ‘the people’ or ‘the workers’ were identical to the interests of the new government.

In all cases this led to the situation where the new government used its monopoly of armed force against sections of the working class that disagreed with it. In Russia by 1921 this had led not only to the destruction of the factory committees and their replacement with one man management but also to the crushing of all opposition through the closure of individual soviets, the suppression of strikes and the banning, jailing and even execution of members of other left organisations.

## Before 1989

Once upon a time left activists could fool themselves that this suppression of democracy had at least delivered a society that was fairer in economic terms and that was some sort of (perhaps flawed) ‘workers state’. The EZLN emerged in a period when such illusions could no longer be held due to the overthrow of the majority of the old ‘communist’ states. So they found a ready audience internationally of activists who had not given up on the project of transforming society but saw the need for a new model for doing so.

The main spokesperson for the Zapatistas, subcommandante Marcos, referred to this attraction in 1995 saying

*“...It is perhaps for this reason—the lack of interest in power—that the word of the Zapatistas has been well received in other countries across the globe, above all in Europe. It has not just been because it is new or*

*one who must be helped, poor things, out of pity, out of alms, out of charity.*

*We want you to see us as your companeros, as being as willing as anyone to mobilize and to support the teachers struggles. Not only because your demands are just and because you are good and honest persons, but also, and above all, because they are our demands as well.*

*Because nothing will be complete nor finished if teachers continue to be oppressed by pro-management unions, if bad labor conditions continue — and the low salaries — , if education continues to breed oppressed and oppressors, if school continues to be — for millions of Mexicans — as distant as dignified housing, a fair wage, a piece of land, enough food, full health, freedom of thought and association, popular democracy, authentic independence and true peace.*

*Now, taking advantage of the fact that you are here, we want to ask something special of you. We want to ask you to support the student movement at the UNAM and the struggle of the Mexican Electricians Union. The one is against the privatization of education, and the other against the privatization of the electrical industry.”<sup>49</sup>*

The clearest appeal for unity with the workers is contained in the CCRI’s 1<sup>st</sup> of May statement from 1995.

*“The workers that build this country bleed from three wounds. The powerful bleed them with unjust*

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<sup>49</sup> Marcos in ‘Teachers are a mirror and window’ to Closing Session of the “Democratic Teachers and Zapatista Dream” Encuentro, August 1, 1999, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)



## Urban Workers

The few Zapatista communiques directed to workers in struggle tend to support such an interpretation. Marcos writing to the striking workers of Ruta 100 for instance says

*“Whatever the outcome of your movement, today you represent what is best about the Mexican working people, you represent the dignity of the workers of the city, you represent the hope of that great revolutionary force which is the force of workers awakened from a long night in which the arrogance of money, the corruptness of phony labor representatives and the criminal action of the government have held down all Mexicans.*

*Be well, workers of Ruta 100. In our poverty, there is little we can give, but we give it with admiration and respect.”<sup>48</sup>*

The Zapatistas organised an encounter for teachers struggling against low wages and democratic unions in August of 1999. At this Marcos declared the Zapatistas

*“are also democratic teachers and electrical workers and university students and workers in the city and the country and artists and intellectuals and religious men and women and neighbors and homosexuals and lesbians and ordinary women and men and children and old ones, that is, rebels, dissidents, inconvenient ones, dreamers.*

*Because of that, the most important thing we zapatistas want to ask you is to see us as another democratic union section. That you do not see us as some-*

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<sup>48</sup> Marcos: To the workers of Ruta 100 — Aug '95, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*novel, but rather because it is proposing this, which is to say, to separate the political problem from the problem of taking power, and take it to another terrain.*

*Our work is going to end, if it ends, in the construction of this space for new political relationships. What follows is going to be a product of the efforts of other people, with another way of thinking and acting. And there we are not going to work; instead, we would be a disturbance.”<sup>4</sup>*

The collapse of the Eastern European ‘socialist states’ in 1989 resulted in the rapid collapse of all the left parties that had considered these societies as ‘actually existing socialism’. In general the only Leninist parties that survived were the ones who had already put a major break between their politics and these societies. But they still had a problem in the fact that they had supported the authoritarian policies of the Bolsheviks in 1918–21 that had created these regimes.<sup>5</sup>

This contradiction may be the reason why there had been very little discussion of the Zapatistas by the traditional left in Ireland and elsewhere until the last year or so. The discussion has only started now because of the realisation that the influence of the Zapatistas was at least part of the reason anti-authoritarian politics were so popular among anti-capitalist activists. So now we are subjected to half baked ‘analysis’ that insist the Zapatistas are on the one hand only the latest manifestation of the foci tactics of Che Guivera and on the other that they need to be taught that the traditional left has the ‘real’ answers’.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Marcos — August 1995, La Jornada August 25, by Carmen Libra, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Bolshevik policies in the 1918–21 period see Aileen O’Carroll, ‘Freedom and Revolution’, Red & Black Revolution no1, 1994.

This attitude is not unique to Ireland, Marcos refers to a similar attitude on the Mexican left and elsewhere in a 1994 interview

*"... What upsets the Pentagon is that when you punch Zapatista into the computer, nothing comes out that says, Moscow, or Havana, or Libya, Tripoli, Bosnia or any other group. And the left, accustomed to the same way of thinking, says, Well, they don't fit in anywhere. It doesn't occur to them there might be something new, that you have to retheorize. And they say, Well then, these poor people don't know what they want, we need to help them.... I have seen various magazines...of Trotskyites and Maoists, of all of the orthodox leftists and of the old dinosaurs that say, Well, the ELZN is very good and what they've done is very good and all, but they lack a program, so here's a program. They lack a party, so here's a party. They lack a leader, so here's a leader"*<sup>6</sup>

Marcos returned to this theme in 1995 in a letter that sought to explain why the Zapatistas are different.

*" We do not want others, more or less of the right, center or left, to decide for us. We want to participate directly in the decisions which concern us, to control those who govern us, without regard to their political affiliation, and oblige them to "rule by obeying". We do not struggle to take power, we struggle for democracy, liberty, and justice. Our political proposal is the most radical in Mexico (perhaps in the world, but it is still too soon to say). It is so radical*

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Subcomandante Marcos, May 11, 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

factories (although they can point out that the working class built them).

The revolutionary laws produced by the EZLN on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1994<sup>46</sup> cannot be called anti-capitalist. They restrict but still very much allow for wage labour, rent and even multi national investment. For example the law that " *Foreign companies will pay their workers an hourly salary in national money equivalent to what would be payed in dollars outside the country.*"<sup>47</sup> while a big step forward for many Mexican workers hardly amounts to the abolition of capitalism.

Perhaps the simple reason is that the Zapatistas don't wish to be a vanguard in any sense of the word and so are waiting for a program for the urban centres and factories to emerge from those who live and work there. Or perhaps they are worried that at this stage of the transformation to talk of economic democracy in the cities would simply serve to alienate some of their supporters.

The first of these two options is the more acceptable but it also contains its own dangers. During the Mexican revolution it was precisely such a lack of clarity that enabled the government of Carranza to mobilise the anarcho-syndicalist unions of the Casa against the rural Zapatistas. The Fox government which has the advantage of being able to claim to have ended the one party state will no doubt seek to use this credibility to isolate the Zapatistas from the workers in the cities. If we accept it was primarily the enormous mobilisations of urban workers and students that stopped the government counter-offensive of 1994 and the offensive of February 1995 the danger of Fox succeeding becomes clear.

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<sup>46</sup> The EZLN Revolutionary laws, Jan 1 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>47</sup> Labour Law & Industry and Commerce Law, Jan 1, 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*collectives, ignoring all of the debts with the government. Banrural (Banco de Crédito Rural), all of the taken assets, all of that, we don't know anything about in the rural zone because where we move those laws will start to operate, that is, the old Constitution before they reformed it. That is the immediate plan that we have, that is, to organize the rural life of this country according to the will of the majority of our companeros. That is, that there be land, because there is land, and that it be distributed, because they just said that they were not going to give any more out.”<sup>44</sup>*

As we have seen land occupations are a reality but the rhetoric behind them is most often based on the occupiers being the legitimate owners of the land rather than on ‘the land to those who work it’.

*We, who have been EZLN support bases since the year of 1994, have recovered this land, which was previously called San Jacinto by the owner, but now we are the true owners.”<sup>45</sup>*

And outside of the question of land occupations in Chiapas the EZLN have been silent on the economic question. While they have supported some strikes in the cities they have not put forward any ideas on how the relationship of workers to the factories might develop in the future. Such workers, indigenous or not, can't claim to be the original owners of the

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<sup>44</sup> Excerpted transcriptions that were published in La Jornada. They were recorded in San Cristóbal de las Casas just after the EZLN liberated the city on January 1, 1994, and the transcription was published in La Jornada [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>45</sup> San Manuel New Town, Francisco Gómez Autonomous Municipality, August 3, 2000. [flag.blackened.net](http://flag.blackened.net)

*that all the traditional political spectrum (right, center left and those of one or the other extreme) criticize us and walk away from our delirium.*

*It is not our arms which make us radical; it is the new political practice which we propose and in which we are immersed with thousands of men and women in Mexico and the world: the construction of a political practice which does not seek the taking of power but the organization of society. Intellectuals and political leadership, of all sizes, of the ultraright, of the right, the center, of the left and the ultraleft, national and international criticize our proposal. We are so radical that we do not fit in the parameters of “modern political science”. We are not bragging ... we are pointing out the facts. Is there anything more radical than to propose to change the world? You know this because you share this dream with us, and because, though the truth be repeated, we dream it together.”<sup>7</sup>*

## **Not the same thing**

In Mexican terms 1996 was the year when the EZLN most wished to emphasise this difference. A new armed group called the EPR (Popular Revolutionary Army) launched attacks on police stations in several Mexican states, saying specifically that unlike the Zapatistas they wished to seize state power. The EZLN was keen to distance themselves from the EPR, all the more so because the EPR sought to imply links between the two organisations.

In a EZLN communique “*to the soldiers and commanders of the Popular Revolutionary Army*” the EZLN wrote

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<sup>7</sup> “What makes us different is our political proposal” Marcos, August 30, 1996, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*“What we seek, what we need and want is that all those people without a party and organization make agreements about what they want and do not want and become organized in order to achieve it (preferably through civil and peaceful means), not to take power, but to exercise it. I know you will say this is utopian and unorthodox, but this is the way of the Zapatistas. Too bad.*

*...it is useful to point out and repeat, that we are different. And the difference is not what you and others have insisted upon, that you do not dialogue with the government, that you do struggle for power and that you have not declared war, while we do dialogue (attention; we do this not only with the government but in a much larger sense with national and international civic society); we do not struggle for power and we did declare war on the Federal Army (a challenge they will never forgive us). The difference is that our political proposals are diametrically different and this is evident in the discourse and the practice of the two organizations. Thanks to your appearance, now many people can understand that what makes us different from existing political organizations are not the weapons and the ski-masks, but the political proposals. We have carved out a new and radical path. It is so new and radical that all the political currents have criticized us and look at us with boredom, including yourselves. We are uncomfortable. Too bad, this is the way of the Zapatistas.*

*...You struggle for power. We struggle for democracy, liberty and justice. This is not the same thing. Though you may be successful and conquer power, we will continue struggling for democracy, liberty and justice. It does not matter who is in power, the*

*“A political force whose members do not exert nor aspire to hold elective positions or government offices in any of its levels. A political force which does not aspire to take power. A force which is not a political party.*

*A political force which can organize the demands and proposals of those citizens and is willing to give direction through obedience. A political force which can organize a solution to the collective problems without the intervention of political parties and of the government. We do not need permission in order to be free. The role of the government is the prerogative of society and it is its right to exert that function.*

*A political force which struggles against the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and against the centralization of power. A political force whose members do not have any other privilege than the satisfaction of having fulfilled its commitment.”<sup>43</sup>*

## **Economics**

A second and related problem with the ideas put forward (or in this case not put forward) by the Zapatistas is in the sphere of the economy. On the one hand they denounce neo-liberalism and call for land occupations as in this interview from January 1994;

*“The immediate objective is that our agricultural laws begin to operate in the liberated zones, that the campesinos organize themselves, taking land, respecting small rural property and working in*

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<sup>43</sup> Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, January 1, 1996, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*the annihilation campaigns! That is why they say: the country must organize itself like this."*

*...the brothers are saying: "That Parliament should obey those it claims to represent." I know I am talking about something new which is difficult to understand...*

***Interviewer What you are saying is to take over the power...***

*To exert it.*

***What you are not saying is how to embody that.***

*Because we don't have the fucking idea of how to do it. I can imagine an assembly in a "canada" (canion), even within an ethnic group.*

*Why? Because I have seen it. I know how they organize themselves and how they go on solving their problems in the midst of a sort of mixture of representativity and assembly.*

***And you honestly believe that that can function for a nation?***

*I know that the other way does not work. What there is right now does not work."<sup>42</sup>*

On this subject however, it is important to note that the EZLN has been very clear that they do not wish to become a political party or promote the formation of one. When the Fourth Declaration of the Lacadon jungle announced the formation of the FZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Front) it defined it as

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Marcos about neoliberalism, the national State and democracy. Autumn 1995, by Samuel Blixen and Carlos Fazio, Taken from Uruguay's "Brecha" newspaper, www.struggle.ws

*Zapatistas are and have always struggle for democracy, liberty and justice."<sup>8</sup>*

One recent Leninist critique that said "*It is a curious 'quality' in a revolutionary organisation that it does not seek state power*" goes on to ask "*What then is the nature of the revolution they advocate?*". We are told "*in the end, the issue is power, the control of society by the producers*". This handy confusion of a party seizing power on **behalf** of the producers with direct democracy leads to the expected conclusion that the Zapatistas "*are not in a position to provide political leadership for the movement that has celebrated their example*".<sup>[46]</sup> This particular 9,000 word critique finds only a couple of sentences to mention the structures of direct democracy that arguably define "*the nature of the revolution they advocate*".

Other left critics, pointing to the fact that the rejection of seizing power was not explicit in the first Zapatista paper, have suggested that this idea was only later developed to gain international support. However, Marcos did in fact vaguely express these ideas in an interview with the Mexican liberal paper 'La Jornada' on the first of January.

*" We hope that the people understand that the causes that have moved us to do this are just, and that the path that we have chosen is just one, not the only one. Nor do we think that it is the best of all paths. .... We do not want a dictatorship of another kind, nor anything out of this world, not international Communism and all that. We want justice where there is now not even minimum subsistence. .... We do not want to monopolize the vanguard or say that we are the light, the only alternative, or stingily claim the*

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<sup>8</sup> EZLN communique "to the soldiers and commanders of the Popular Revolutionary Army, August 29, 1996, www.struggle.ws

*qualification of revolutionary for one or another current. We say, look at what happened. That is what we had to do.”<sup>9</sup>*

## The Encounter

This rejection of the traditional methods of the left is not simply confined to Mexico. In 1996 the Zapatistas organised an international encounter in Chiapas attended by some 3,000 activists from over 40 countries (including the author). The Encounter ended with the 2<sup>nd</sup> declaration of Reality (the final venue being the community of La Realidad) which asked, what next, what is it that we were seeking do to do?

*“A new number in the useless enumeration of the numerous international orders?*

*A new scheme that calms and alleviates the anguish of a lack of recipes?*

*A global program for world revolution?”*

This rhetorical rejection of the methods the left had used to organise internationally, particularly in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> international, was followed by a suggested alternative:

*“That we will make a collective network of all our particular struggles and resistance’s. An intercontinental network of resistance against neoliberalism, an intercontinental network of resistance for humanity.*

*This intercontinental network of resistance, recognising differences and acknowledging similarities,*

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpted transcriptions that were published in La Jornada. They were recorded in San Cristóbal de las Casas just after the EZLN liberated the city on January 1, 1994, and the transcription was published in La Jornada [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*know each other, they come to solve a common problem. But in other places it isn’t so, I tell them. People live separate lives and they use the assembly for other things, not to solve the problem. And they say, no, but it means that yes, it works for us. And it indeed works for them, they solve the problem. And they propose that method for the Nation and the world. The world must organize itself thus. That is what they call “to rule while obeying” (“mandar obedeciendo”). And it is very difficult to go against that because that is how they solve their problems. And the one who doesn’t work out, they dismiss him, and there is no big scandal. When the ejido’s head authority makes a mistake, they remove him and he goes on to become a member of the assembly.*

*We have insisted upon the fact that what the EZLN proposes is not a representative democracy, that of the political parties. And they tell us in articles, and in the newspapers, that we are wrong, that in reality the Indigenous communities have been defeated, because what is worth here is the individual, and the communities want to have the collective will valued. Yes. That’s why we say: we need another, different non-partisan political force. When we propose that, we do it as when we started the war in 1994. At that time I used to tell them (the communities who had decided to start the offensive), we are going to go to hell, they are going to fuck us up; the international correlation of forces is against us, they are going to cut us to pieces. And the brothers saying: Let’s go, let’s go, and let’s go to war. And now it’s let’s go, and let’s go for this type of democracy. And how do you tell them that it is no good. If they have used it for years...What better result than to have resisted all*

tial circumstances. It can be easily argued that similar process accompanied the periods of radical change everywhere from the Irish War of Independence to the ending of apartheid in South Africa. In the transition the radicals were isolated and then suppressed.

## Stages theory

It remains unclear where exactly the Zapatistas stand here. Part of the confusion may arise from the two distinct stages the Zapatistas see as being necessary. Part of it is a feeling that the way they make decisions in Chiapas may not be applicable to the rest of the country. In a 1995 interview Marcos discusses these issues. Interestingly it also suggests a difference between the political leadership of the EZLN and the rank and file on this very question.

*“We are planning a revolution which will make a revolution possible. We are planning a pre-revolution. That is why they accuse us of being armed revisionists or reformists, as Jorge Casaneda says. We are talking about making a broad social movement, violent or peaceful, which will radically modify social relationships so that its final product might be a new space of political relationship.*

...

*I was saying that the communities are promoting democracy. But the concept seems vague. There are many kinds of democracy. That’s what I tell them (the Indians). I try to explain to them: You can do that (to solve by consensus) because you have a communal life. When they arrive at an assembly, they*

*will search to find itself with other resistance’s around the world. This intercontinental network of resistance will be the medium in which distinct resistance’s may support one another. This intercontinental network of resistance is not an organising structure; it doesn’t have a central head or decision maker; it has no central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who resist.”<sup>10</sup>*

The quotations above contain the essence of what it is that makes the Zapatistas different. The purpose of the organisation is not to seize power on behalf of the people – rather it is to create a space in which people can define their own power. This is a radically different project from what revolutionary politics have been in the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution, Leninism, the idea that the party must rule on behalf of the people, became the common core of almost all revolutionary movements. Contrast, for example, the Zapatista approach with Trotsky’s speech to the 1921 Bolshevik party congress attacking one faction he said had “*placed the workers right to elect representatives above the party. As if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers democracy*”

## Pinch of salt

On this ideological level we can see what separates the Zapatistas from most of the left. But anyone who has been a member of a left organisation will know there can be a sharp difference between the external rhetoric of workers democracy and an internal reality where real discussion is suppressed, instructions come from the top down and mechanisms exist that

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<sup>10</sup> Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, January 1, 1996, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

insure the same small clique runs the organisation for decade after decade. Do similar problems exist with the Zapatistas?

This is a more difficult problem to answer. It is no use simply quoting Marcos or any other prominent Zapatista as they may simply be telling us what they reckon we'd like to hear. The ongoing Low Intensity War means that it can be very difficult to ask questions (particularly in relation to the military side of the organisation) never mind get accurate answers. This has led some left critics to claim that visits to the rebel zone are controlled so that "On a well-signed route, people have to agree to see only what they have to see and to believe in the leader's words"[4].

Indeed, there can be a point to such critiques. Left parties, particularly in power, have been experts at arranging carefully controlled trips to model communities and workplaces where international visitors come into contact only with carefully coached party members. 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. Little has been written about day-to-day life in the rebel area.

One of the immediate gains of the Zapatista rising was the creation of a partially liberated zone of thousands of square kilometers. Within this zone thousands of Zapatista communities have carried out a long running experiment in self-mangement. Sometimes this has been on land they have occupied since the rising but more often it is on new land cleared from the Lacanodon jungle in the decades before 1994.

I don't want to over state the liberated nature of this area. For one year to February 1995 it was under the more or less uncontested control of the Zapatistas. Then the army launched an offensive which was halted only by massive demonstrations in Mexico city. The years since have seen a Low Intensity War where up to 70,000 soldiers have been installed in army

*Democracy — regardless of who is in power — is the majority of people having decision making power concerning issues that concern them. It is the power of the people to sanction those in government, depending on their capacity, honesty and effectiveness.*

*The zapatista concept of democracy is something that is built from below, with everyone, even those who think differently from us. Democracy is the exercise of power for the people all the time and in all places.*

*Today, in response to the current election process, the zapatistas reaffirm our struggle for democracy. Not only for electoral democracy, but also for electoral democracy."*<sup>41</sup>

The historical problem with this sort of approach, in Mexico and elsewhere, is that it leads to a process by which liberal reformist parties can use the revolutionaries to help overturn more authoritarian governments, but once this is achieved can then rapidly isolate and neutralise the revolutionaries. This happened in 1914 during the Mexican revolution when Carranza was able to use the anarcho-syndicalists of the *Casa* to overturn the Huerta regime. The Constitutionalists then allowed the *Casa* to organise amongst urban workers and used their suspicion of the religious nature of the armies of Zapata and Villa to mobilise 'red battalions' to fight them in 1915.

Once they had been defeated and strikes began in Mexico Carranza simply dissolved the red battalions in January 1916 and by February began a process of closing down the unions offices and arresting the leadership. When the unions called a second general strike in late July the government reacted with martial law including the death penalty for striking in essen-

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<sup>41</sup> EZLN communique regarding elections, June 19, 2000. [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)



*For zapatistas, democracy is much more than an electoral contest or changes in power. But it is also an election fight, if it is clean, equitable, honest and plural.*

*That is why we say that electoral democracy is not sufficient for democracy, but it is an important part of it. That is why we are not anti-election. We believe political parties have a role to play (nor are we anti-party, although we have criticisms of party doings).*

*We believe that the elections represent, for millions of persons, a space for dignified and respectable struggle.*

*Election time is not the time for the zapatistas. Not just because of our being without face and our armed resistance. But also, and above all, for our devotion to finding a new way of doing politics, which has little or nothing to do with the current one.*

*We want to find a politics which goes from below to above, one in which “governing obeying” is more than a slogan; one in which power is not the objective; one in which “referendum” and “plebiscite” are more than just words which are difficult to spell; one in which an official can be removed from his position by popular election.*

*Concerning the political parties, we say that we do not feel represented by any of them. We are neither PRDs or PANs, even less PRIs.*

*We criticize the parties’ distance from society, that their existence and activities are regulated only by the election calendar, the political pragmatism that goes beyond its mandate, the cynical juggling act of some of their members, their contempt for the different.*

bases throughout the Zapatista area and dozens of paramilitary groups have been armed and encouraged to attack Zapatista communities. In addition, the selective distribution of government aid and religious sectarianism have both been used to divide individual communities and areas into pro and anti government groups.

The importance of this area is not that it can form some sort of permanent isolated alternative. Even if this was what the Zapatistas wanted there would be no way they could defeat the far larger and better equipped Mexican army (and if they did the US would intervene). The importance of this zone is that it provides a space in which the methods advocated by the Zapatistas are being put into practise. This is in the most difficult circumstances, for even without the army and paramilitary presence, the extreme poverty, lack of education and infrastructure would present formidable barriers.

## **Difficult conditions**

The areas the Zapatistas openly organise in are rural and extremely poor. Small communities of a dozen to over 100 families are typical, forced to live off the land without the benefit of modern agricultural machinery. Some of the men will have worked outside the village in local towns or even as far as the USA but in the villages themselves the only political presence tends to come from the Catholic church’s local variety of ‘liberation theology’, the EZLN itself and a variety of campesino organisations.

Prior to the rebellion many communities did not have sufficient fertile land to produce enough food. Typically ranchers (who boasted they were of pure ‘Spanish blood’) had seized the fertile land at the bottom of the canyons leaving the less fertile mountainside to the indigenous people. As well as getting the most fertile land this also effectively forced the local

indigenous people to work for them, virtually as serfs. Stories of physical punishment of those they considered not to be working hard enough and assassinations of those who sought to organise against them were all too common. With the rebellion the landowners fled and in many cases their abandoned land was taken over and sometimes used to establish new communities.

The ongoing Low Intensity War makes accurate ground reports difficult. For the last few years the government has run a program of roadblocks and observer deportation designed to hide these communities from the world's eye. The war also means ordinary people are deeply suspicious of outsiders in general, and are particularly wary of tall, white and comparatively wealthy N. American or European observers who look far more like the traditional enemy than any sort of ally. However, thousands of people from outside Chiapas have lived in Zapatista communities as peace observers or worked with communities on solidarity projects like the construction of water pipe lines.

## Dies de Abril

Many observers have been able to form a real idea of how Zapatista communities function. The Irish Mexico Group maintained a peace camp in one community, Diez de Abril from the start of 1997 to early 2000 (and still occasionally visits)<sup>11</sup>. Over these three years at least 200 of people people visited Diez (including the author in September '97). The core presence was maintained by three or four people, each of whom spent months in the community during these years and developed friendships with people living there.

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<sup>11</sup> For letters from observers, pictures and other information about Diez see [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*tive of the political parties, but of those who are democratically elected to that task.*

*At the back of the line behind the presidential campaigns, the campaigns by the legislative candidates are not winning anything for themselves, nor are they of any benefit to those who are seeking executive office. They are different elections, because their function is different. The legislative contests deserve an attention they have not received.*

*We hope that the next legislature — which has been so neglected during these elections — does not carry out their work tied to commitments with their party leadership or with the elected executive, but with the Mexican men and women who, having voted or not for their candidacies, make up the Mexican nation and are the ones with whom they must make laws.*

*Today, in response to the current election process, the zapatistas declare ourselves to be in favor of an authentic balance of powers. Not just in the exercise of their duties, but also in the fight for seats. It is as important to know about the proposals and positions of those candidates seeking to be deputies and senators as it is to know of those of the presidential candidates. The end of presidentialism is a condition for democracy in Mexico.*

*...Today, in response to the current election process, the zapatistas denounce that it is not an election of citizens responding to political proposals, and those who represent them, but rather a state election, with the opposition confronting not only the official party, but the entire machinery of the Mexican state. No election can be called "democratic" under these conditions.*

## The 2000 election

An EZLN communique released for the Presidential election in June 2000 discusses at length the flaws of the current systems and possible reforms to it;

*“In Mexico, presidentialism has been a heavy burden and an obstacle for democracy. Even though we have not had a president in the last 70 years who has not belonged to the official party, the possible arrival to the presidential chair of the opposition does not mean “movement towards democracy,” if the executive branch continues to be concentrated in one single person, and while the branches charged with legislating and upholding the law are merely decorative elements which are changed every 3 or 6 years. The survival of the presidentialist system in Mexico is a fact. What kind of democracy is this, in which the fundamental decisions of a nation fall to one single individual for six years?*

*An autonomous legislative branch, independent of the executive, is essential in a democracy. Nonetheless, the campaigns for deputies and senators have passed unnoticed. The natural passion over the presidential contest has managed to conceal an advance which has already been seen during the last 6 year term which is now ending: a legislative branch struggling for its independence and autonomy.*

*In addition to confronting the executive, the legislative branch should become independent of party leaders, who not infrequently replace leaders of the parliamentary wings in those agreements and regulations which correspond exclusively to the legislative arena. Legislating is not the preroga-*

Diez de Abril is situated between the towns of Altamirano and Comitán in the highlands of Chiapas. About 100 families lived there in 1997. 80% of the people are Tzeltal, the other 20% are Tojolobal. Linguists estimate these languages diverged over 3,000 years ago<sup>12</sup>, so discussion in the community requires translation from one language into another or more commonly through the use of Spanish. However, while most of the men speak some Spanish only 1/3 of the women do and very few are fluent. As elsewhere in Chiapas, living conditions are difficult due to poverty, poor education (typically only one year of formal education), a lot of ill health and a high death rate (particularly of children and old people). There is no sanitation in the community, except the latrines they constructed themselves, no access to clean water and only a single ‘unofficial’ electricity cable.

The ranch Diez is on was occupied on 10<sup>th</sup> April, 1995. Those who moved onto the land had worked for the rancher before the rebellion in atrocious conditions. In the months before the takeover they met in assembly on the land to decide how to divide up the land. One decision was the name of the new community ‘Diez de Abril’, after the day (10<sup>th</sup> April 1919) when Zapata was assassinated. 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 compañero, 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*

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<sup>12</sup> The ancient Maya, 5<sup>th</sup> ed, Robert J. Sharer, p585

*the land and divided it up among the people. Each family has a plot of land of their own and then there are also collective [plots].*<sup>13</sup>

The church in Diez is the main assembly point for the community. 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 over 12 has a vote (although votes are very rare, most decisions being made by consensus), 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. These delegates form a council that meet between assemblies and organise the day-to-day work. These ‘*responsibles*’ co-ordinate work in particular areas. They serve a limited term (one to two years) and are subject to re-call within this time if it’s felt they are not ‘leading by obeying’ (the Zapatista slogan for following the mandate given to them).

The collectives that carry out particular tasks are set up by and answerable to the assembly but are otherwise autonomous. Collectives in Diez include ones for coffee, cattle, honey, horticulture, baking, sewing and chicken rearing. Some of the pro-

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Bolshevik policies in the 1918–21 period see Aileen O’Carroll, ‘Freedom and Revolution’, *Red & Black Revolution* no1, 1994.

a socialist revolution. Today the Zapatistas still seem to talk of the need for two stages, the first of which is equivalent to a national revolution.

Their ideas were spelled out in some detail in the Second Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle;

*“We aren’t proposing a new world, but something preceding a new world: an antechamber looking into the new Mexico. In this sense, this revolution will not end in a new class, faction of a class, or group in power. It will end in a free and democratic space for political struggle. This free and democratic space will be born on the fetid cadaver of the state party system and the tradition of fixed presidential succession. A new political relationship will be born, a relationship based not in the confrontation of political organizations among themselves, but in the confrontation of their political proposals with different social classes. Political leadership will depend on the support of these social classes, and not on the mere exercise of power. In this new political relationship, different political proposals (socialism, capitalism, social democracy, liberalism, christian democracy, etc.) will have to convince a majority of the nation that their proposal is the best for the country. The groups in power will be watched by the people in such a way that they will be obligated to give a regular accounting of themselves, and the people will be able to decide whether they remain in power or not. The plebiscite is a regulated form of confrontation among the nation, political parties, and power, and it merits a place in the highest law of the country.”*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Second Declaration from the Lacandona Jungle, June 10, 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

Marcos in 1995 claimed that *“What is in crisis is the system, the government, the old things and the anachronous ways of doing politics. But the nation can survive with a new pact, with a new political class, and with new forms of doing politics.”*<sup>38</sup> The existence of a distinct ‘political class’ separate from the ordinary people implies the continued existence of some form of state system.

On December 8 2000 the CCRI referred to Amado Avendano who had probably won the 1996 election as governor of Chiapas and who was widely recognised as the ‘rebel governor’.

*“Six years after his taking office, Don Amado Avendano has acquitted himself well to those who elected him and, despite the electoral fraud committed against him, who supported him.*

*The zapatista indigenous communities, through the EZLN, are publicly recognizing the former Governor of Chiapas today. He can have satisfaction in having carried out his duty.”*<sup>39</sup>

Again the implication here is that if Amado Avendano had been allowed into power the Zapatistas could have worked with him. In the 1994 presidential election it appears that most Zapatistas voted for Cardinas, the candidate of the opposition PRD even if the Zapatistas stopped short of publicly endorsing him.

Although the Zapatistas have broken with many elements of their political past one thing that appears to have carried over is a stages theory of liberation. In the old days this would have talked about the need for national liberation to precede

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Marcos — August 1995, La Jornada August 25, by Carmen Libra, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>39</sup> Don Amado Avendano has acquitted himself well, Communique’ from the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, December 8, 2000.

duction of each collective goes to its members; the surplus goes into a central community fund controlled by the assembly.

Very occasionally the Assembly structure is mentioned in EZLN communiqués. For instance in Jan 2000 the community of Nicolas Ruiz was in dispute with a company building a warehouse on its land, the communiqué they released read in part:

*“On various occasions, we have let Engineer Enrique Culebro Siles, State Delegate of FIDELIC, know that in our community there is a decision-making structure in place, whose highest authority resides in the Assembly, and it is only by consensus of this assembly do we take action on any given issue. In this case, we have let him know that the Assembly has not discussed or made a decision on the establishment of a warehouse by the company he represents. Thus, setting up a shed to buy corn in the community is irresponsible and shows a lack of respect for our authorities, since there has been no agreement on the matter.”*<sup>14</sup>

When several hundred soldiers approached the community of Morelia on January 8<sup>th</sup> 1998 they were driven off by the women of that community. Roselia, “a middle-aged woman from Morelia” explained:

*“We held a meeting and decided that we were going to throw out the army if they came, ... we have decided that we are going to defend our communities, ... We want everything for the pueblo and not just for a few people or for one community.”*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The company fails to respect the assembly, Nicolas Ruiz, Chiapas; January 20, 2000, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>15</sup> The EZLN and Indigenous Autonomous Municipalities

Activists who have visited other communities report a similar decision making mechanism, (see box opposite). There is a lot of variation from community to community but the basic model of the assembly remains the same, its origins lie in indigenous tradition, a tradition common to many other indigenous groups throughout the Americas.

## Some problems

There are problems with the traditional indigenous structure, especially the fact that traditionally women had no voice except in some cases where widows were allowed to speak (because they had become responsible for family land). Another problem was that the assemblies were often controlled by a group of 'elders' rather than recallable delegates. In the past the Spanish invaders and later the landlords were able to make use of this by buying individuals off as part of the *cacique* system.

The assemblies in the Zapatista area are struggling against these elements. Women now have the right to speak and vote — although what extent they actually do so varies from community to community. In Diez the elders now only have automatic power in questions of tradition. In 1997 they were resisting a demand from the younger people that the system of paying dowry as part of marriage should be abolished.

This description of how the Zapatistas make decisions on the basis of a single community confirms the reality behind the 'decision making from below' language of the interviews and communiques. But it is obvious that such a structure cannot easily be scaled up to accommodate more people and larger geographical areas. An assembly of 10,000 or 100,000 people could not be a good decision making mechanism because very few people can speak at such a gathering. And of course we

Zapatistas, tended to stem from Marxist origins. However the Zapatistas represent a return to at least some of the ideas of the Mexican anarchists.

## Co-existence?

From this point of view the most attractive aspect of the Zapatistas is that they demonstrate how decisions can be effectively made without a need for electing individuals to represent our views. On the historic level, there is a conflict between systems of direct democracy on the one hand and government on the other. In Russia 1918 and Barcelona 1937, as elsewhere, this conflict led to the government using force to dissolve the structures of direct democracy. So from the anarchist perspective there is a choice to be made here, you are for one or the other but not both.

I cannot claim that the Zapatistas agree. Indeed it is precisely to these sort of debates that Marcos was responding in May 1995 when he wrote (in imagining his political trial)

*"The communists accuse him of being anarchist: guilty*

*The anarchists accuse him of being orthodox: guilty".<sup>37</sup>*

Because I disagree with a lot of what follows, precisely because I consider the Zapatistas to be somewhat 'orthodox' in terms of electoral politics, I quote extensively below from the material they have produced explaining their position.

The Zapatistas seem to argue for the co-existence of their system of direct democracy and the indirect electoral system of the Mexican state. They also talk of reforming the electoral system, by introducing some element of leading by obeying.

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<sup>37</sup> La Jornada, May 5, 1995

## Some problems I see

The criticisms I'm moving on to make are from the perspective of anarchism. Modern socialism first arrived in Mexico with the Greek anarchist Plotino Rhodakanaty in early 1861. In the next 60 years Mexican anarchism went through many stages (parallel with the developments in Europe) which included the first agrarian uprising with a positive program and the formation of the Mexican trade unions. To this day the anarchist flag (red in one diagonal, black in the other) is the symbol used to indicate a strike in progress in Mexico.

Almost immediately the Mexican anarchists realised the connection between the society they were fighting for and elements of the traditional practise of the indigenous people. They advocated linking up with the indigenous people on this basis. By 1867 the anarchist Chávez López who declared "*I am a socialist because I am the enemy of all governments, and I am a communist because my brothers wish to work the lands in common*" had launched the first rural insurrectionary movement. In 1869 in April they issued in a manifesto calling for "*the revered principle of autonomous village governments to replace the sovereignty of a national government viewed to be the corrupt collaborator of the hacendados*".<sup>36</sup>

There is no room here for a detailed discussion of anarchism in Mexico, John M Hart's "Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class" is a useful English language introduction. The introduction above is just to demonstrate that the history of anarchism in Mexico is considerably longer and more important than even the key figures of Zapata and Ricardo Flores Magón imply.

Mexican anarchism was destroyed as a mass force by the 1930's and although small collectives have kept the ideas alive after this point revolutionary politics, including those of the

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<sup>36</sup> John M Hart's "Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class"

don't want to spend our whole lives at (or getting to) such meetings.

This has led some to conclude that the decision making structures used in the small villages of Chiapas have little relevance for those of us in large cities. (A discussion that as we shall see is also taking place within the Zapatistas). But even in Chiapas decisions have to be made that affect tens and even hundreds of thousands of people. One of the strengths of the Zapatista movement is that have a method for making such decisions that preserves the right of ordinary people to decide what decisions are made (and not as in our 'democracy' merely who gets to make them.)

The method the Zapatistas use is a variation of 'delegate democracy', a method that is used in many countries at the base of trade unions and student unions. An individual is elected from amongst those they normally work with (eg a shop steward or class rep). Rather than being then allowed carte blanche to decide what they like they are given a clear mandate to represent the views of the group that selected them to regional meetings of delegates. Such systems also contain other mechanisms to limit the power delegates can informally accrue like

- limiting the length of time any one person can represent a group
- insisting that they still carry out at least some of their normal work
- ensuring that they report back how they voted and what decisions were made to the group that delegated them.

If they fail to do so then the group can immediately re-call them and select someone else.

The Zapatista decision making structure broadly functions along these lines. This makes it one where all levels of the organisation from the top down are answerable to the ordinary

people at the base. The Zapatista communities form an organisational and decision making network involving hundreds of thousands of people. There are 38\* rebel municipalities, each one with from 50 to over 100 individual communities.

## Military command

The Zapatista military structure is not however internally democratic. Rather it is organised as a conventional army with officers apparently appointed from the top down. Some would argue that in a war situation a democratic structure is not possible. I would point to the Makhnovista of the Russian civil war and the anarchist militia of the Spanish Civil War as historical demonstrations that military systems where the rank and file select delegates to act as officers are feasible.<sup>16</sup> This of course is not simply a debate about military tactics – in any situation where the people do not directly control the army there is a real danger of the army being used against the people.

Although the internal structure of the EZLN is not democratic overall command of the army is. That is, unlike almost all other rebel armies, the command of the army does not end in its own military command but rather in the hands of those at the base whom it claims to represent. There are a number of extensive interviews with subcommandante Marcos, in which he describes how this decision-making structure evolved<sup>17</sup>. In essence, as the EZLN evolved from a few students who had gone into the mountains with the authoratarian project of leading the people to liberation into an army of the people, it was forced to accept that the people and not the army command should have the final say.

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<sup>16</sup> See Can you have an anarchist army?, WS59, Spring 2000, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>17</sup> See [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws) for English translations of many of these

*the PRI are left governing only themselves, without being able to penetrate into the communities. Basically this means the slow destruction of the false democracy sustained by the political party system and its replacement by communities and organizations that construct their own history first as autonomous municipalities and eventually as autonomous zones.*<sup>34</sup>

It is revealing how much left commentary on the Zapatistas ignores these structures altogether. Instead the Zapatistas are analysed on the basis of the revolutionary laws or the demands they have put forward in the peace process. Such an analysis seems to stem more from the observers wish to be in power than any true understanding of what a revolution should look like.

On the local level of Chiapas it is this issue of autonomy that the government most fears as it threatens to remove their right to impose decisions on the people completely. *“In its very basic form autonomy consists in recapturing and restoring the culture and self-determination taken away over the last 504 years. That is, in terms of territory, that the people that live in a region administer their own economy, their own politics, their own culture and their own resources.”*<sup>35</sup>

The idea of autonomy provides the core of the attraction many of the international supporters of the Zapatistas have for the rebellion in Chiapas. But, at least as the EZLN see it, it is not an idea without its contradictions. Not least the danger of perceiving these structures as just being applicable to Chiapas or co-existing with the apparatus of state rule.

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<sup>34</sup> The EZLN and Indigenous Autonomous Municipalities

<sup>35</sup> IV. On autonomy an interview of Zapatistas from the Ocosingo region Published in “El Navegante” (Sailors in every port) translated by Beto Del Sereno



*dedicate themselves to their [Council] work, and not have to go the fields.*

*The autonomous municipalities resolve local problems of coexistence, relations and exchanges between communities, and they attend to minor crimes. The application of justice is based on customary law. For example, in cases of common crimes, the punishment imposed by the Autonomous Council is reparation of the damages: instead of punishment by jail or fines, a sentence is imposed of working for the community, or for the aggrieved family.*

*In the autonomous municipality of Polho, in Chenalho, where thousands of war displaced are found, the Autonomous Council receives national and international humanitarian aid, and it distributes it to the camps through the Supply Committee.”<sup>33</sup>*

It is this sort of decision-making structure that truly determines the health of a revolution rather than the fine words of its leaders or the slogans it is organised under. And also of course they present a clear alternative to the state (and seizing state power) something the Leninist left is reluctant to acknowledge. Strangely enough both the Mexican government and the local Catholic church seem to be more on the ball here.

A document written by the Catholic Dioceses of San Cristobal de las Casas says *“The naming of authorities through indigenous norms and customs, signifies that the political party system is no longer the only channel to elect authorities and government representatives. At a local level municipal presidents imposed by*

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<sup>33</sup> Enlace Civil, A.C., Autonomous Municipalities: The resistance of the indigenous communities in response to the war in Chiapas, Nov. 1988, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

## The CCRI

The ‘Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee’ (CCRI) is the body that commands the army. This body (or indeed bodies as there are also regional CCRI’s) is composed of delegates from the communities. It is not in itself a military structure although it appears to include permanent military representatives like Tacho.

Important Zapatista policy communiqués are always signed by the CCRI and are normally written in a style that carries the hallmarks of a document subject to discussion and debate by a large number of people (eg comprised of a list of numbered points). As well as being in control of the army and issuing communiqués the CCRI is also a structure for making day to day decisions that affect the entire region.

When one community in the region of Morelia wanted to occupy land shortly after the rebellion *“the local Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, (CCRI) ordered locals to wait, expecting a region-wide land settlement after the 1994 dialogue”<sup>18</sup>*. In this sort of situation it is obviously vital that the CCRI really represents the collective decision making of the communities and is not simply a leadership keeping control of the base of the movement. In this case its judgement was wrong and was changed by late 1994 allowing land seizures, including that at Diez, to go ahead.

A month after the rising ‘La Jornada’ interviewed some members of the CCRI. One of them, Isacc, explained the accountability of the CCRI as follows;

*“If the people say that a companero who is a member of the CCRI is not doing anything, that we are not respecting the people or are not doing what the people*

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<sup>18</sup> Making Zapatismo irreversible, Michael McCaughan, 20-8-96, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*say, then the people say that they want to remove us ...*

*In that way, if some member of the CCRI does not do their work, if they do not respect the people, well compa, it is not your place to be there. Then, well, excuse us but we will have to put another in your place”<sup>19</sup>.*

This was an early description of the system of delegate democracy in place where the communities could recall their CCRI delegate if they felt they were not representing them. In a major interview with Mexican anarchists in May 1994 Marcos described the delegate system of decision making before going on to outline the limitations on even the CCRI’s power to make decisions.

*“In any moment, if you hold a position in the community (first, the community has to have appointed you independent of your political affiliation), the community can remove you. There isn’t a fixed term that you have to complete. The moment that the community begins to see that you are failing in your duties, that you are having problems, they sit you down in front of the community and they begin to tell you what you have done wrong. You defend yourself and finally the community, the collective, the majority decides what they are going to do with you. Eventually, you will have to leave your position and another will take up your responsibilities.*

*.. strategic decisions, important decisions have to be made democratically, from below, not from above. If*

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<sup>19</sup> First interview with EZLN CCRI-CG, La Jornada, 2/4/94 & 2/5/94, Blanche Petrich and Elio Henri’quez, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*The autonomous municipalities, parallel to the constitutional ones, do not receive any financing from the state, nor do they collect taxes.*

*It is the communities who elect their representatives for the Autonomous Municipal Council, which is the authority for the municipality. Each representative is chosen for one area of administration within the autonomous municipality, and they may be removed if they do not fully comply with the communities’ mandates.*

*Generally, a Council is made up of a President, a Vice-President, a Secretary, a Minister of Justice, a person in charge of Agrarian Matters, a Health Committee and a director for the Civil Registry. Each members’ powers are clearly defined within their appointment, and they function in a collegial manner, with the advice of previous authorities or of the Council of Elders.*

*The Councils are elected and renewed every one or two years, according to the municipality.*

*The activities and the responsibilities of each autonomous municipality are dependent on the will of their members, and on their level of consolidation. They do not manage public resources, and their budget, if it exists at all, is very limited, and due to the cooperation of some of their members. Those who hold a position on the Municipal Council do not receive a salary for it, although their expenses should be paid by the same communities who request their presence, through cooperation among the members. In some cases, members of the Council are supported in their farm work, so they can*

*moters from the region's 75 communities meet regularly through workshops and meetings in order to create the municipality's new educational system"*<sup>31</sup>

Education is an important example of the depth of the impact of the Autonomous Municipalities, for instance in the Ocosingo region "People from the communities are saying that they might as well suspend the present education because it is being imposed from above. We consider that the present education does not include the four themes that we think are the most important: the economic question, the political question and the cultural and social questions. So now we are calling on all the teachers to elaborate a new educational project that is supported by the community bases and that is based on the four main themes mentioned. At this point all the schools are closed which was agreed on by the base communities. The communities (of our region) have said, we will close all the schools and call together all the professors who work in this region so that they can develop their proposal, even though we also have ours."<sup>32</sup>

## How they function

Enlace Civil, another Mexican NGO in detailing the government's attempts to smash the Autonomous Municipalities explains how they function;

*"The autonomous municipalities are made up by the indigenous communities within an area defined by zapatista influence. The communities of an indigenous zone or area are the ones who decide, at an assembly of all their members, whether or not they will belong to the autonomous municipality.*

<sup>31</sup> The EZLN and Indigenous Autonomous Municipalities

<sup>32</sup> IV. On autonomy an interview of Zapatistas from the Ocosingo region Published in "El Navegante" (Sailors in every port) translated by Beto Del Sereno

*there is going to be an action or series of actions that are going to implicate the entire organization, the authority has to come from below. In this sense, even the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee isn't able to make every decision. You could say that the EZLN is different because in most political-military organizations there is only one commander, and in the EZLN the Clandestine Committees are composed of 80 people, 100 people, 120 people or however many. But this is not the difference. The difference is that even the Clandestine Committees cannot make certain decisions, the most important decisions. They are limited to such a degree that the Clandestine Committees cannot decide which path the organization is going to follow until every compañero is consulted"*<sup>20</sup>

The first interview<sup>21</sup> with CCRI members in Feb. 1994 also included the first mention of this form of decision making. (The interviews questions are in bold):

**"How did you decide collectively to rise up in arms?"**

*"Oh, that has been going on for months now, since we had to ask the opinion of the people and because it was the people's decision. Since, why would one small group decide to jump into war? And what if the people don't support them? What if the people haven't spoken yet? Then you can't struggle in that way.*

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Subcomandante Marcos, May 11, 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>21</sup> First interview with EZLN CCRI-CG, La Jornada, 2/4/94 & 2/5/94, Blanche Petrich and Elio Henri'quez, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

*“It was the people themselves who said ‘Let’s begin already. We do not want to put up with any more because we are already dying of hunger.’ The leaders, the CCRI, the Zapatista Army, and the General Command, if the people say so, well then, we’re going to start. Respecting and obeying what the people ask. The people in general. That is how the struggle began.”*

***“How did you carry out your assemblies?”***

*“They are done in each region; in each zone we ask the opinion of the people. Then that opinion is collected from different communities where there are Zapatistas. And Zapatistas are everywhere in the state of Chiapas. They are asked their opinion, to say what they want: if we should start the war or not.”*

***“Will the people also be asked whether they want to negotiate?”***

*“We cannot dialogue or negotiate by ourselves. First we have to ask the people. At the state level, where there are companeros, we have to consult about whether we are going to negotiate or not over there. If the people say so, we are doing what the people say. Why? Because we are fulfilling our commitment to the people. Because the people have lived with this for so many years: a life that is so hard, with every kind of injustice. Because of this, it isn’t easy to enter the dialogue so quickly. If the people go to dialogue, well fine. If not, ‘sallright. No. That’s why it is not easy.”*

So even the CCRI does not have the power to make major decisions, such as to choose between peace and war. These must instead be made through a ‘consulta’.

In fact SIPAZ is wrong to state that the municipalities make no sense from the western perspective. Europe has seen similar structures emerge at times of revolutionary upheaval, as Soviets in 1905 and 1917 in Russia, as Workers Councils in Germany from 1918–23, as Factory Councils in Italy in 1920–21, as Workers Committees and Cantonal Federations in Spain in 1936–37 and as recently as 1974–76 in Portugal as Workers Committees and Neighborhood Commissions. Ireland even saw a short lived example during the Limerick general strike of 1919 when the trades council took over much of the running to the town and even issued its own money. Although these structures differed from each other and from the structures in Chiapas they all represented a mechanism for ordinary people to run their societies directly.

The business of the Autonomous Municipality is concerned with the practicalities of day to day life rather than the issuing of communiques<sup>30</sup> or the commanding of troops. As such they are perhaps less exciting than the CCRI or the military command of the EZLN and so only receive media coverage when the army invades the towns where they are based in order to try and destroy them. But for the ordinary Zapatistas it is the very day to day nature of the Autonomous Municipality that means they have a major impact on life

One observer, Mariana Mora, explains that

*“Within the newly created municipal structures, the communities name their authorities, community teachers, local health promoters, indigenous parliaments, and elaborate their own laws based on social, economic, political and gender equality among the inhabitants of diverse ethnic communities.*

*In the autonomous municipality 17 de Noviembre, located in the region of Altamirano, educational pro-*

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<sup>30</sup> Although some have issued communiques see About the Zapatista autonomous council’s, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

communities from the official government municipalities of Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, La Trinitaria, La Independencia and Frontera Comalapa.<sup>27</sup>

EZLN Commandante Samuel explained the reason's why the EZLN decided to create these liberated zones,

*"It was an idea that surfaced in 1994 as a way of not having to interact with government institutions. We said 'Enough!' to them controlling all aspects of our community for us. By creating autonomous municipalities we are defining our own spaces where we can carry out our social and political customs as we see fit, without a government that never takes us into account, interfering for its self- benefit."*<sup>28</sup>

The Non-Governmental Organization, SIPAZ, has this to say concerning the Autonomous Municipalities:

*"Considered from a western political perspective, the autonomous municipalities make no sense. They have no resources or real power or legal legitimacy, and they are dying, encircled by hunger, diseases, the paramilitary threat and the security forces. However, for the indigenous peoples, they constitute an eloquent symbol of a culture which is resisting and defying the dominant culture, making a reality of a different way of understanding politics and of organizing the economy, society, and even human relations."*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Tierra y Libertad, One Year Later, Luis Fernando Menendez Medina (Human Rights defender and prisoner in Cerro Hueco), [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>28</sup> The EZLN and Indigenous Autonomous Municipalities

<sup>29</sup> Enlace Civil, A.C., Autonomous Municipalities: The resistance of the indigenous communities in response to the war in Chiapas, Nov. 1988, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

## Consultas

In June of 1994 the 'Second Declaration from the Lacandona Jungle' (these declarations are key policy statements) agreed to enter into talks. It explained that *"The EZLN, in a democratic exercise without precedent in an armed organization, consulted its component bases about whether or not to sign the peace accords presented by the federal government. The Indigenous bases of the EZLN, seeing that the central demands of democracy, freedom and justice have yet to be resolved, decided against signing the government's proposal."*<sup>22</sup>

How are such consultations carried out? Another communique from the same period explained the *consulta* process;

*"The consultations took place in every community and ejido where there are members of the EZLN.*

*The study, analysis, and discussion of the peace accords took place in democratic assemblies. The voting was direct, free, and democratic.*

*After the voting, official reports of the results of the assemblies were prepared. These reports specify: the date and place of the assembly, the number of people who attended (men, women and children older than 12 years old), opinions and principal points discussed, and the number of people who voted."*<sup>23</sup>

The consulta is similar to a referendum **but one in which intense discussions in each community is as central to the process as the vote itself**. The purpose of these discussions can be to frame the questions that will be voted on. This

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<sup>22</sup> Second Declaration from the Lacandona Jungle, June 10, 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>23</sup> How the consultations with the communities was done, CCRI, La Jornada, June 3, 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

is important, as it is through dictating the wording of referenda that governments can often impose limitations on what their effect will be. The Zapatista *consulta* take weeks and have been a great source of annoyance to the Mexican government, which always wants an answer to its proposals on the spot or within days.

In his May 1994 interview Marcos had explained how the process worked on the community level — *“The people meet in assemblies and the representatives put forth, for example in the case of the consultations, the demands of the EZLN and the response of the government. They’re explained. What is it that we asked for and what has the government said in response? And they begin to debate, Well, this is bad and this is good. After the community says, We have already debated, we already understand, now we can vote — this could take days. In fact, almost all the consultations have gone on for two, three days now and they haven’t yet reached the point of voting. They arrive and say, Well okay, we are in agreement, let’s vote if we are ready to vote, if we already understand what it is we are going to decide. It’s not about raising your hand or putting a check-mark for one option or the other. You have to debate and analyze the pros and the cons.”*<sup>24</sup>

An interview with EZLN Major Ann Maria published in March of 1994 referred to the *consulta* that had happened before the launch of the Jan 1 attacks. *“First we voted on whether to begin the war or not. After the decision the attack was organized, with the support of the high commanders”*<sup>25</sup> Interestingly in a video interview from 1998 Marcos revealed that this *consulta* had gone against the wishes of the military

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Subcomandante Marcos, May 11, 1994, [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

<sup>25</sup> Don’t Abandon Us!, Interviews with EZLN women, Interview conducted by Matilde Prez and Laura Castellanos, published in La Jornada’s special supplement for International Women’s Day, March 7, 1994. [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

command who did not consider the EZLN prepared for an offensive war. Later in the same interview Ann Maria refers to how a similar process had passed the Women’s Revolutionary Law

*“They’d given us the right to participate in the assemblies and in study groups but there was no law about women. And so we protested and that’s how the Law for women came about. We all formulated it and presented it in an assembly of all the towns. Men and women voted on it. There were no problems. In the process opinions of women were asked in all the towns. The insurgents helped us write it,”*<sup>26</sup>

## Autonomous municipalities

The *consultas* are ideal for making the big decisions on the questions of war or peace. However, state wide votes are far too unwieldy to settle smaller questions. Some of the more important can be settled by the CCRI, but from 1995 another regional structure emerged to deal with regional co-ordination and record keeping. The rebellion has also meant Zapatista communities refusing all contact with the Mexican state — right down to refusing to register births and deaths.

The practical problem thrown up by the need for inter community co-ordination saw the formation of these regional councils. These are known as Autonomous Municipalities. For instance 100 communities make up the Autonomous Municipality named after the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon. Another, Tierra y Libertad, on the border with Guatemala contains a total of 120 Tzotzil, Tseltal and Tojolobal

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<sup>26</sup> Don’t Abandon Us!, Interviews with EZLN women, Interview conducted by Matilde Prez and Laura Castellanos, published in La Jornada’s special supplement for International Women’s Day, March 7, 1994. [www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)