

Understanding the Zapatistas

Five years of rebellion in Mexico

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It is now five years since the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) came to the attention of the world when they seized five towns in Chiapas on New Year's day in 1994. The years since have seen only a couple of weeks of actual warfare. However the uneasy cease-fire has seen hundreds of land occupations and several national and international gatherings.

Thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people have travelled to Chiapas to see the rebellion with their own eyes. Hundreds have been deported by the Mexican government for doing so. Solidarity groups exist in most western countries, including Ireland. In 1993 Chiapas was as unknown backwater in Mexico. Now, in the eyes of many activists, it has moved to centre stage.

In this context the lack of serious discussion of the Zapatistas by the revolutionary left is surprising. There exists a certain amount of (mostly) uncritical reporting by individuals and a few essays aimed at putting the rebellion in a broader context. But the 'official left' either remains silent, or worse, produces ham fisted and lazy critiques that merely compare the rebellion to Cuba and Ché Guevara and say 'they failed, so will the Zapatistas'.

From early in 1994 members of the Workers Solidarity Movement took an interest in the rebellion. In the years since some of our members have visited Zapatista communities in Chiapas and have started to learn about Mexican history and politics. We have published some of our findings. In Workers Solidarity no.55 we carried an article describing the democratic assemblies and other decision making processes in the Zapatista community of Diez de Abril.

Origins of the Zapatistas

It is widely known that the EZLN was initiated in the 1980's by a small group of Marxist revolutionaries. However this can only be half the story. Many such groups were attempting similar strategies throughout Mexico. Why was it that in Chiapas this particular group succeeded? In order to do so they had to abandon their Marxist-Leninist politics. But principally it was the radicalisation of the indigenous people of Chiapas from the 1970's that created the conditions for rebellion.

They have much to rebel against. The state is controlled by nine wealthy families and, particularly in the highlands, the ordinary people have no rights and no security. Resistance is inevitable.

Three factors were influential in inspiring the uprising in Chiapas. The first of these is the influence of Liberation Theology. Central to this was the arrival of a new Catholic bishop, Samuel Ruiz. Although initially hostile to social radicalism he was soon to initiate a method developed in Brazil which saw the Church identify social problems and encourage people to non-violently demand justice. Often these were very basic issues such as workplace deaths.

The second factor is what the EZLN term 'Civil Society'. By this they mean a combination of NGO's (Non-Government Organisations), unions, community projects, political parties and individuals. Many of these organisations were formed locally. Following the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico city many urban activists left to organise in the poor rural areas of Mexico. The result was a blossoming of education projects and peasant organisations all aimed at empowering a section of Mexican society that was previously voiceless.

The third factor was a new found confidence and politicisation amongst the indigenous people. The Mexican government organised a national indigenous congress, intended to bring together the indigenous people from all over Mexico so they could improve their handicraft production.

This also, unwittingly, provided a platform for the indigenous to exchange their grievances and begin a process of national co-ordination that would politicise many.

The process greatly escalated in the face of government plans across the Americas to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of America. To the indigenous of course this represented the start of 500 years of at best, enslavement; and at worst genocide. Their response was to organise national and then continental meetings which opposed the official celebrations in the 1989 to 1992 period.

A failed strategy

It is within this highly politicised atmosphere that a small cadre of revolutionaries, influenced by the ideas of Ché Guevara moved to Chiapas around 1983. They had almost no local contacts but hoped to become the political-military leadership that would lead a peasant insurrection surrounding the cities. This was a common enough strategy in Latin America in this period and most left criticisms of the Zapatistas are based on a critique of this strategy. However this misses the point that in the original terms of this small group they failed and abandoned this strategy.

The main EZLN spokesperson sub-commander Marcos has described this “initial proposal of the EZLN [as] a completely undemocratic and authoritarian proposal”. “Our conception was vertical: What is necessary is a group of strong men and women, with ideological and physical strength, with the resistance to carry out this task”. Their conception of revolution was common to that of all Leninist parties.

They saw the revolution as needing a strong leadership in order to direct the masses. They saw the USSR as socialist even if perhaps a somewhat flawed sort of socialism. They saw the seizure of state power by a party ‘on behalf’ of the people as key to success. World events were however to call this conception into question

The collapse of the Soviet Union

As a model of an alternative society the USSR had a certain popularity with ‘3rd world’ revolutionaries. In the ‘1st world’ it only appeared to offer a trade off of political freedom for limited economic equality. In the ‘3rd world’ political freedom was not a part of capitalism and the USSR seemed to offer a model for national development.

By the late 1980’s the USSR was in a deep economic and political crisis. The EZLN was forced to go through a long period of questioning. Although they came to the correct conclusion in rejecting the soviet model they also decided this removed the usefulness of talking in terms of socialism, revolution, or the normal jargon of the left. They continue to see the USSR as representing socialism and conclude that this sort of system simply failed.

Anarchists, on the other hand, described the soviet economy as a ‘state capitalism’ created by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. As such while its collapse can be seen as a defeat for the ideas of Leninism, it was a step forward rather than a step back for socialism.

The peace process in Latin America

Towards the end of the 1980's and the start of the 1990's, more and more Latin American guerrilla groups entered into various peace processes. The reality of these was that few ordinary people benefited from them while guerrilla commanders got land or political careers. A cynicism developed about the way the leaderships cashed in on the process. This is reflected in the Zapatista slogan "Everything for everybody, nothing for ourselves".

Despite the failure of their original political perspective the EZLN still offered something to communities. The social struggles were meeting with increased repression, in particular from armed thugs belonging to the landlords, known as 'white guards'. The EZLN were capable of offering a measure of armed defence to some communities. Marcos identifies this as the reason why a small number of indigenous youth came to join the organisation and they were able to operate in some of the communities.

However the communities were not willing to accept the leadership of the EZLN. This created a period of friction in which the political-military leadership plan of the original cadre was defeated and replaced with one where the army was answerable to the community. This is expressed in another popular Zapatista slogan "To lead by obeying".

Marcos identified the events around the 500th anniversary as the moment at which they turned from a movement of a couple of dozen into an army of hundreds and then thousands. The communities ordered the EZLN to go on the offensive against the state. The one compromise the army command got was a years delay to train for offensive operations. And so on New Years day 1994 the EZLN emerged from the jungle and seized the major cities of the Chiapas highlands.

The Mexican influence

From the time of the rising the Zapatistas have insisted that they cannot be understood as another Latin American 'guerrilla' group or as Marxist Leninists but rather as Mexican revolutionaries. In part this is a response to the Mexican governments' assertion that the EZLN want to break up the 'Mexican' nation and implement politics that failed elsewhere in Latin America.

Mexico has a strong and often unique revolutionary tradition of its own. Once you start to find out about this tradition then many aspects of the politics of the Zapatistas start to fall into place. From the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 it has been common for revolutionaries to form alliances with indigenous communities. Many of the writings of Mexican leftists, in particular from the anarchist tradition, focus on the communal and democratic aspects of indigenous culture as the beginnings of a model of free society.

The most successful of these alliances was the movement of Emiliano Zapata. This movement adopted the anarchist slogan 'Land and Liberty' and explicitly refused to seize state power, most famously when, on capturing Mexico city Zapata refused to even try out the presidential throne.

The nature of the Zapatistas

The most common mistake made in viewing the Zapatistas is to treat the movement as a political party or organisation rather than a social movement. If by the 'Zapatista movement' we understand all those communities who identify themselves as Zapatistas and we look at the structure

of those communities then we find the real parallel is with ‘workers’ councils’ or ‘soviets’ rather than with a political party. These structures are common to many revolutions in which the working class dominates or at least has an independent voice and represent an attempt to take over the running of that society in a libertarian way.

The common feature of all the Zapatista communities is not a common and worked out political program but rather a commonly agreed structure of decision making. It is not at all clear that there exists any program beyond the demands for dignity, liberty and justice. However what is agreed upon is the decision making structures which combine a radical democracy with more traditional indigenous assemblies.

As described in our last issue, the communities have an assembly meeting once or more per week where all members of the community can talk and vote. Within the community there is often a community council of delegates who have responsibility for particular tasks and these meet more frequently. There may also be sub- assemblies related to particular groups, (for instance women’s assemblies) or to particular jobs like sewing.

Between the communities there exist several structures. Most important are the autonomous municipalities of which there are 32. Each municipality includes around 50 communities. It’s worth quoting at length from an Enlace Civil A.C. (NGO) report on these

“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.

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.

[...]

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 co-operation 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 co-operation among the members. In some cases, members of the Council are supported in their farm work, so they can 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.”

A council system

As can be seen this structure fulfills many anarchist desires for such bodies, including delegates that are mandated and recallable and who serve limited terms of office with no special privileges because of their positions. Although security and language problems mean that there are few reliable reports by observers of these processes, they are referred to again and again in interviews with Zapatistas at all levels of the organisation from Marcos to individuals in the communities. They also tie in with what WSM members and other Irish observers have seen and been told about Diez de Abril.

At the level of the entire movement a delegate body exists called the CCRI (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee). Again this is a body of mandated and recallable delegates and importantly it is this body rather than Marcos or any other individual that commands the army.

The importance of these structures to understanding the Zapatista rebellion is frequently overlooked because of the concentration on searching the EZLN communiqués and interviews for information which will help to define this movement. This confusion arises from treating the Zapatistas as an orthodox political party with a coherent program, which it is not. However as we have seen this confusion is understandable given the development of the Zapatista movement from a small cadre of relatively orthodox Marxist revolutionaries whose view of the revolution was very much politico-military leaders making decisions which the peasant masses would follow.

Essentially a state of what revolutionaries call 'dual power' exists in Chiapas struggle. The state has existed publicly since 1995 with the declaration of the 32 autonomous municipalities. The state has the local government, the army and police and attempts to get the communities to respect and obey this. The Zapatistas have the community assemblies, the EZLN and the municipalities and attempts to get the people to respect these. The Zapatista structures described here share many similarities with 'councils' or 'soviets' that are created by the workers (or peasants) in most 20th century revolutions. Both forms of authority cannot coexist in the long run, eventually one must defeat the other. Which is why since 1995 the state has continued its low intensity war against the Zapatistas.

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