

# State terror and dirty war

## A year of state recuperation in Mexico

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October 8, 2007

Following a heady 18 months of diverse and popular struggles up down the country, the Mexican state is using familiar tactics to reassert itself as the country's main authority. Enlisting the support of the US state and using the cover of a war on drugs (a war which the US now claims to have won, in part thanks to the deployment of 30,000 Mexican troops to different parts of the country) and the search for the culprits behind a recent bombing campaign attributed to Marxist-Leninist guerrillas the *EPR (Ejército Popular Revolucionario* – Popular Revolutionary Army), the Mexican police and army have spent the year of 2007 attacking – with increasing audacity – working class movements in places such as Oaxaca and the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas.

Subcomandante Marcos, the infamous spokesman for the EZLN (Zapatista) movement, confirmed in a communiqué dated September 24<sup>th</sup> that *La Comisión Sexta* (the movement's leadership) had cancelled the second leg of their nationwide tour *La Otra Campaña* (The Other Campaign – which seeks to build an all-Mexican revolutionary movement) due to what political commentators are calling “the biggest [military] offensive in nine years” in Chiapas. Thus far in 2007, over 10,500 hectares of land have been seized by paramilitary groups masquerading as farmers' interest groups. Of course, these activities are done with the full approval of the local state infrastructure: *Tribunal Unitario Agrario* (the local land arbitration panel) had already rubberstamped these moves.

Moreover, the Chiapan state government – dominated by members of the highly corrupt social democratic PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – Institutional Revolutionary Party) – and the municipal government of PRI's leftist split the PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática* – Democratic Revolutionary Party) have been complicit in the continued presence of some 79 permanent (para)military camps within the state of Chiapas, with their weapons pointed at the Zapatista communities.

The recent government attacks in Chiapas are said to be linked to the *Plan Puebla Panamá*, a NAFTA-inspired initiative introduced in 2001 by the then Mexican President Vicente Fox in order to “promote the regional integration and development” of southern Mexico, the entire of Central American and Colombia. The programme would include further privatisation of land and the opening up of the area to even more capitalist investment – which would necessitate the

removal of hostile political movements. In southern Mexico, this process dates back to the 1880s but has been stiffly resisted every step of the way.

In the communiqué, Marcos also expressed fear at the safety of EZLN members entering areas “where [the EPR] has presence or influence” without an EPR ceasefire, and that even in the event of an EPR ceasefire for the benefit of La Otra Campaña, that the “nervously stupid” PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional* – National Action Party) right wing government of Felipe Calderón “would launch an attack and later attempt to blame it on non-existent disputes with the EPR”.

The EPR came into existence in 1996 in the south-western state of Guerrero. Heavily armed, they claimed to have killed 59 soldiers within 6 weeks of their formation. The Mexican state was still reeling from the Zapatista uprising and for a brief moment, revolution looked imminent. However, the shortcomings of the choice of an attempted clandestine insurrection quickly became apparent to the Zapatistas (who were quick to disassociate themselves from them), and like most leftists, the EPR became bogged down in a series of splits and disappeared for over 10 years.

The renaissance of the EPR last July took the form of several bomb attacks in the El Bajío region of central Mexico on gas lines owned by Pemex, the nationalised oil company. It was quickly followed by bombs in department stores and banks in Ciudad de Oaxaca before another bombing of a Pemex gas line, this time in Veracruz. Rumour is rife of the involvement of government agents in the newly active EPR faction(s), and some whispers centre around government attempts to orchestrate a situation similar to the Strategy of Tension in Italy in the 1970s, in which government agent provocateurs committed terrorist acts and blamed them on anarchists and revolutionaries in order to vindicate their subsequent repression. As of yet, these claims are just speculation, although such underhand tactics have been the intermittent *modus operandi* of the post-revolutionary Mexican state.

The EPR communiqués claim that their attacks are in response to the disappearance of their “leaders”, Edmundo Reyes and Gabriel Alberto, in Oaxaca in May this year. The government claims another revolutionary organisation kidnapped him, a story the Mexican public has not swallowed. Reyes’ daughter, Nadín Reyes Maldonado, has been especially explicit in blaming the state, while admitting that, upon her father’s release, “there are some things he’s going to have to explain to us”.

Either way, the state has used the pretext of EPR’s apparent association with the Oaxaca revolt to launch several more assaults on the APPO (*Asamblea Popular del Pueblo de Oaxaca* – Popular People’s Assembly of Oaxaca) movement. In one incident in July, Emeterio Marino Cruz was beaten into a coma by police when he and fellow APPO members tried to participate in the celebration of the Guelagetza, a traditional Oaxacan festival. Cruz emerged from hospital deaf, dumb and paralysed in the right side of his body. Even the Mexican state found this story too much to condone, and have since detained five policeman (including three from the notoriously savage PFP [*Policia federativa preventiva* – Federal Preventative Police]).

However, that represents an anomaly in terms of the state’s activities in Oaxaca. Conservative estimates put the death count at 20, with an unknown amount of disappearances and tens of political prisoners. This figure is still rising. Enrique Rueda Pacheco, head of the fiercely radical Oaxacan section of the SNTE (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores en Educación* – National Union of Education Workers), whose strike in May last year started the revolt, was forced into exile by the Oaxaca state government’s death threats, despite Pacheco’s repeated attempts to end the teachers’ strike.

The hand-wringers from Amnesty International have twice visited the area, twice wagged their fingers at the police and military, and twice their appeals have been ignored. The government even sent its own *Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos* (National Human Rights Commission) – an organisation whose redundancy is almost universally recognised – down to investigate, with a rather ironic consequence. Their envoy, a *panista* (member of the PAN party), called for the resignation of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the embattled PRI-affiliated state governor – a moderate prognosis in the circumstances – only to retract it publicly 24 hours later. It is in times of heightened class struggle such as these that the squabbling ruling factions suddenly find it in themselves to drop their differences.

Meanwhile, another tactic successfully used by Ortiz et al to break the revolt is to force a split in the local SNTE. Sección 22 has been joined by Sección 59, which was intended to be comprised of *priístas* (PRI supporters) and scabs (although even the scabs' union has found itself ignored by its party and thus is becoming more and more hostile towards local government). In response, as reported on Libcom, Sección 22 members formed the oppositional current CNTE (*Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación* – National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers).

As for the APPO itself, it appears to be in a state of crisis, exhausted by the intensity of the last 17 months and merely focusing on continuing to exist rather than confronting its contradictions. Pacheco, the aforementioned exiled SNTE leader, has been “trying to end the teachers' strike since July [2006]” in favour of a movement that was broad enough to incorporate PRD and the Zapatistas, while the arrest of APPO's de facto leader, Flavio Sosa, revealed that he was still a member of the leftist PRD, despite the APPO's explicit prohibition of political party members. Concurrently to the writing of this article, one can participate in a poll on the APPO website which deals with the upcoming municipal elections. One can either choose that the APPO “participate [in the elections] and continue struggling [outside of electoralism]” or that it “doesn't participate and continues struggling”. Thus far, the results are roughly two-thirds in favour of participation. As has been commented on Mexico before, at times the bourgeoisie prefers to rein in subversive or revolutionary elements, integrating them into the unwieldy and multi-tentacled state.

However, even if Oaxaca is being recuperated, it pales in comparison to the events in San Salvador Atenco in Estado de México, just outside Mexico City. Following a rebellion in May 2006 over the police's attempt to evict market stallholders (which are about as ubiquitous in Mexico as moustaches), the small town saw a new level of police violence. Unlike Oaxaca and Chiapas, the movement failed to organise itself sufficiently and was brutally crushed within a week. Around 400 people were taken prisoner in Atenco and neighbouring Texcoco, and the country was shocked by their systemised rounding up and subsequent beating, torture and rape (a subsequent investigation reported that “30 of 47 women detained suffered sexual abuse”). Most of the police brutality happened in the police vans on the way to be processed, but in a clear signal to would-be rebellious residents of Atenco, the police patrolled the town's narrow streets, emptying houses into the street, binding and masking their detainees and hitting them with batons as a means of “counting them”.

As such, although the FPDT (*Frente del Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra* – People's Front in Defence of the Land) continues, forging links with APPO and the EZLN, their main focus seems to be legal battles to free the huge amount of people still imprisoned (many of whom still haven't been charged, more than 15 months after the revolt) in jails in Santiaguito and Texcoco, only

really emerging in public to record the victories and defeats in this process. However, it's worth noting the current unrest in Atenco can be traced back to a successful farmer-led movement against the attempted construction of an airport there in 2002 (in the end, an airport opened up the road in Toluca instead). As such, it seems unlikely that we've heard the last from there.

Indeed, there is plenty of ongoing class struggle in this country. Libcom has already reported on the national public sector workers' *Movimiento ResISSSTE* against a new law which would seriously deplete their pensions. There's also a massive ongoing strike in the glassworkers' industry based in the peyote-rich state of San Luis Potosí, as well as miners' strikes in Zacatecas and Guerrero. Mexican strikers are partially helped by Mexican labour law, which (much to the envy of British workers) legally requires striking workers to occupy their workplace. The net effect of this law however, is that the many employers contest the legality of strikes in the court, and often workers suffer losing their right to strike on a legal technicality due to a right wing judge.

Generally however, the year of 2007 has been one of retreat for the Mexican working class, helped in no small part by the controversy over the presidential elections in summer 2006. The eventual victor, Calderón, who has defined his stay in power thus far through his combative stance against working class movements, is casually referred to as a "fascista" in the chattering classes, but the PRD's Andrés Manuel López Obrador has played his part too, distracting many would-be working class militants with his dead end post-electoral campaign based mainly on vague claims of electoral fraud. The FPDT is keen to point out that, like the rest of bourgeois political scene, Obrador was strangely silent in the aftermath of the brutality in Estado de México.

Nationally, the huge divisions still remain (Mexico is economically the most unequal country in the world, housing Carlos Slim, the world's richest man, while 40% of the country lives in extreme poverty) and there exists a general distrust of the corrupt, dishonest and hegemonic political elite. Unfortunately, the economic disparity has social ramifications too in widespread anti-indigenous attitudes and suspicion directed at people from *barrios populares* (the dangerous, if fascinatingly atmospheric, overcrowded suburbs on the edge of the great Mexican cities) The attempts of *La Otra Campaña* to build a national movement against this backdrop are to be commended, even if their main success thus far has been in publicising various local struggles throughout the country. However, as we have seen not only recently but also historically (in events such as the Tlatelolco students' massacre of 1968 and the strikes in Río Blanco in 1906–07 and Cananea in 1906) in this country, any movement with any sort of relevance will have to contend against the dual Mexican and American bourgeoisie.

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