

The Zapatistas: Live and On Tour

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First there was the waiting. The 1,111 Zapatista delegates to the Founding Congress of the FZLN (The Zapatista National Liberation Front) in Mexico City were supposed to arrive in San Cristobal de las Casas between two and five in the afternoon. A small crowd huddled under a tarp in the pouring rain to meet them in the cathedral square. Gradually the crowd grew. By eight o'clock the Zapatistas still had not arrived, but the rain had cleared and now about 2,000 people waited in the square. Music was playing from the stage; a few hot air balloons with "EZLN" painted on the side were released into the night sky, but still no Zapatistas.

Finally at ten o'clock, the Zapatistas entered the city of San Cristobal for the first time since they took over the city in the uprising of January 1994. This time though, they were not armed. The whole town lined up along Avenida Insurgentes to watch them come in. The Zapatistas marched down the street chanting "El pueblo unido, jamas sera vencido!" (The people united will never be defeated!) and "El pueblo armado, jamas sera' callado!" (The people armed will never be silenced!). Women carrying babies, little girls with no shoes, old men and young boys all wearing scarves or ski masks over their faces marched into the center of the city. The crowd watched in almost complete silence, with a smattering of applause here and there. The population of San Cristobal is largely made up of "coletos" who trace their roots back to the old Spanish colonial elite and are generally not supportive of the Zapatistas or any other Indigenous struggle.

As the Zapatistas continued to pour into the city, it became clear that this was not simply a parade of the 1,111 delegates. Fourteen thousand other Zapatistas had traveled from their remote communities to San Cristobal to see their delegates off. It took two hours for all of the Zapatistas to enter the square. On the stage, the leaders of the delegation were presented with a baton, representing the authority of the indigenous communities; the Mexican flag representing the indigenous demand to be a part of the country that has historically marginalized them; and the EZLN flag. Afterwards, hundreds of Zapatistas made makeshift beds and slept under the arches of the municipal building, while others danced the night away, leaving the city before the first light. The next day, walking around the city, it was hard to believe they had actually been there.

Recent Events

The EZLN's march on Mexico City occurred in the midst of a deepening political crisis for the ruling Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (PRI). On July 6 the PRI suffered a number of major electoral defeats. (see article p. ??) The alliance of opposition parties that defeated the PRI drew support from people disgusted with a number of unpopular PRI initiatives. The privatization of much of the social security system, a colossal bail-out for investors in an ill-fated system of toll roads, and the loosening of price controls on a number of essential commodities have all inflamed public opinion against the PRI. (In the state of Tabasco, as if to demonstrate their complete lack of contact with reality, the PRI-controlled legislature passed a law against the sale of cold beer—predictably provoking a wave of protests).

As the EZLN's march drew closer to the capital the government responded erratically. In mid-August the Mexican Federal Army dismantled their fortifications and withdrew troops from a number of communities in Chiapas. This surprise move stirred speculation about a broader demilitarization of the region that the military promptly quashed when they first explained they were only moving the troops around and then proceeded to re-establish themselves in one of the communities from which they had just withdrawn. On the day the Zapatistas left San Cristobal

the bodies of three young men were found who had apparently been executed by Los Jaguares, an elite unit of Mexico City's police. The executions took place amidst a series of massive police raids on poor and working-class neighborhoods on the pretext of attacking organized crime, in which large numbers of innocent people have been beaten and arrested.

Oaxaca

The Zapatista's march route took them through several historical and contemporary centers of popular resistance in Southern Mexico. The march's second major stop was the city of Juchitan in the state of Oaxaca. Where indigenous communities have risen up against a proposed canal that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and run through their lands. The Zapatistas were warmly welcomed by over ten thousand people who had waited for them for over ten hours in the rain. The crowd included the municipal leadership of Juchitan which is under the control of the popular organization, COCEI (The Worker, Student and Campesino Coalition of the Isthmus). In Oaxaca the Zapatistas were joined by 500 people from eight different indigenous ethnic groups in Oaxaca. Another thousand members of 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance from the neighboring state of Guerrero also joined the march.

The San Andres Accords

While the ostensible purpose of the march was to enable the Zapatistas to attend the founding convention of the FZLN and the second National Assembly of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), the march also served to put pressure on the government to comply with the San Andres accords signed almost two years ago between the government and the EZLN. The San Andres accords committed the government to making a number of changes in the law and in the constitution to guarantee indigenous communities a much greater degree of self-determination including the recognition of their own forms of self-government, and most crucially, control over land and natural resources. The government's failure to comply with the accords led the EZLN to break off negotiations with the government last September. Compliance with the Accords has become the main demand of Indigenous Mexico and the Zapatista march has made the accords fiasco the primary example of the undemocratic character of the Mexican state.

Morelos

By the time the Zapatista caravan rolled into Tepoztlan in the state of Morelos, it included over a hundred vehicles and stretched out over 9 and a half miles. Passing through the night they were greeted by crowds of people with flags, torches, and bonfires. Morelos was the starting point of the 1911 uprising led by Emiliano Zapata from whom the modern Zapatistas take their name.

Building the Frente

The process of organizing the Zapatista National Liberation Front (FZLN) began with the EZLN's Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle. In the period leading up to the founding convention

of the FZLN, the leadership of the EZLN asserted with increasing frequency that the FZLN was not to be “the political arm” of the EZLN in the sense that, for example, Sinn Fein is the political wing of the Irish Republican Army.

Instead the Zapatistas envisioned the FZLN as an independent “political force of a new type” that explicitly rejected the pursuit of state power. The base of the FZLN was to be the hundreds of Civil Committees for Dialogue and Peace that had been set up across the country at the EZLN’s initiative.

In their best effort to make lemonade out of lemons, government spokesmen effusively “welcomed” the Zapatista march on Mexico City as an indication that the Zapatistas were preparing to become a peaceful political force by participating in the FZLN. The spectacle of 1,111 EZLN delegates going to the FZLN convention no doubt reinforced this view. Imagine the shock when the EZLN declared that they would not be part of the FZLN and furthermore, that if the government did not comply with the San Andres Accords they were prepared to launch another uprising.

Nunca Mas Un MEXICO Sin Nosotros

A popular slogan along the march “Nevermore A Mexico Without Us” challenged the official mestizo mythology of the Mexican state and the national consciousness of the Mexican people as a whole. Under colonial rule Mexico was governed by a strict racial hierarchy. Popular participation in Mexico’s long struggle for independence and finally in the Mexican Revolution discredited the ideology of European supremacy. In its place emerged another mythology of the Mexican people as a homogenous mixed race of European and indigenous origins. But, this mythology excluded the large minority of indigenous peoples who were never fully integrated into the old colonial order and who have continued to occupy a marginal and precarious position in Mexican society. The Zapatista uprising and the following wave of political defiance on the part of indigenous peoples across Mexico has shaken the myth of a homogenous “raza” and forced Mexican society to confront not just its diversity but its criminal treatment of indigenous peoples. The struggle of indigenous Mexicans for their inclusion in Mexican society, but also for their autonomy as distinct cultures within Mexico has taken on a the moral force similar to that of the 1960s Civil Rights movement in the US.

Mexico City

The Zapatistas’ arrival in Mexico City preceded Mexico’s independence day by two days. The Zocalo (the main plaza of the capital) was decked out in red, green, and white flags and lights draped over all the surrounding buildings and main streets. 100,000 Mexico City residents filled the plaza and spilled over into the streets chanting “Zapata vive! La lucha sigue!” and singing the Zapatista hymn while waiting for over four hours for the Zapatistas and the delegations that had joined them along their five-day, 750-mile journey to the capital.

When the march finally arrived in the center of the city, the crowd was ecstatic. People cried, blew kisses, chanted, “No estan solos!” (You are not alone!) and thrust their fists or the V for victory symbol in the air. The Zapatistas, obviously weary and slightly overwhelmed by the size of the crowd and the city itself (some looked up warily at the buildings towering above them) returned the people’s show of love by waving and chanting back. Once they arrived at

the stage, the Zapatistas called on the government to comply with the San Andres accords and to remove troops from Zapatista communities in Chiapas. The ferocity of the Zapatista demands in the Zocalo contrasted starkly with their purpose in the city, to participate in the founding of a peaceful and civil grassroots organization. Commandante Claribel declared, "If the government wants war, let's go to it. We Zapatistas will fight with valor because we have one weapon the government does not. It is called dignity." This was the first sign of many throughout the week that despite their dedication to creating peaceful civil and political space, the Zapatistas have no intention of putting down their arms.

Double Membership?

The FZLN convention was divided into small groups, each charged with the same task of working through a number of proposals for the FZLN's principles of unity, structure, and program of action. The positions of the small groups would then serve as the basis for formally establishing the FZLN. While there were many heated points of discussion, and a certain amount of general chaos, the central issue that emerged was the question of double membership. Would the FZLN be open to members of political parties? While it is still difficult to determine the ultimate shape of the FZLN, the convention made two crucial decisions. First, they rejected double membership but opened the FZLN to members of non-party social movement organizations and did not exclude the possibility of alliances with political parties in certain circumstances. Second, the convention decided on what it called a "horizontal structure" without a centralized leadership. The Civil Committees are to be transformed into local cells of the FZLN; a body composed of delegates from every state will make decisions on national direction. Finally, the FZLN chose as its program of action a national campaign for peace and demilitarization and compliance with the San Andres Accords.

Cuicuilco

The Second Assembly of the National Indigenous Congress began with an elaborate ceremony on the ancient pyramid of Cuicuilco near University City on the southern edge of Mexico City. The leading Zapatista delegates and those of other indigenous organizations inaugurated the conference atop the pyramid with a three hour ceremony. Along with members of indigenous organizations from all over the country and other parts of North America, artists, intellectuals, students, religious people, activists, and ordinary folks attended the ceremony to show their solidarity with the struggle of Indigenous people for dignity and autonomy and to welcome the Zapatistas once more to their city.

Indigenous Autonomy

The Assembly of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) was meant to prepare for the upcoming convention of that organization in October. Unlike the FZLN, the CNI is a relatively strong organization with a determined sense of mission. The CNI is the broad national umbrella organization of the various local, state, and regional indigenous organizations of Mexico. It was formed during the recent upsurge in indigenous resistance in the wake of the Zapatista uprising. While

there is a lively debate within the CNI on many questions facing the indigenous movement the organizations generally agree that the Zapatista uprising put indigenous issues on the national agenda and that militant direct action is crucial to winning any serious victories.

UNAM

On September 15, on the campus of the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM), the people of Mexico City and the Zapatistas finally got a chance to sit down and talk. Instead of the ceremonial formality that had marked all previous events on the Zapatista tour circuit, at UNAM the Zapatistas divided themselves into about seven different groups under the shade of scattered trees in the main quad.

Within these large groups, Zapatistas and Mexico City folk sat down in small groups to talk and it was a beautiful sight. People from vastly different circumstances spoke to one another about their families, their lives, their homes, their dreams. A soccer match developed between the students and the Zapatistas; the students won twelve to two. (You try playing soccer in a ski mask!) These two reporters were especially excited to meet the delegates from Santa Rosa El Copa, the base community of the Anarchist Project in the Mexican Southeast that we have been supporting for the past year.

Jokingly called the “Picnic with the Zapatistas,” this event allowed the people of Mexico City to see the Zapatistas not just as symbols of resistance, but as real people. And it gave the Zapatistas who come from tiny, remote pueblos in the mountains and jungles of Chiapas a chance to learn more about the people and the life of a city they could barely comprehend.

The next day on the site of the 1968 slaughter of student protesters by the Mexican government, Zapatistas and locals performed a cleansing ritual; they took each other by the hand and danced the night away to the sounds of cumbia and salsa. Without the slightest sign of shyness or trepidation, smiling, laughing couples quickly filled Tlatelolco plaza.

Revolutionary Prospects in Mexico

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 initiated a period of intense political struggle in Mexico. Ever since the 1968 student massacre at Tlatelolco there has been considerable pressure for democratization and an end to the PRI’s one-party rule. In the early 1980s, in response to the struggles generated by a deep economic crisis, the PRI took the tentative first steps toward opening up the system. These resulted in the first opposition victories in local elections. This process accelerated rapidly under the pressure of the Zapatista uprising and the massive popular support it generated. Now it is massively evident that the PRI can not continue to rule in the old way; some sort of dramatic restructuring of Mexican political life is inevitable. The Mexican business class and foreign economic interests there are clearly committed to making a transition to some sort of multi-party “democracy.” Accordingly, the PRD and the PAN are rapidly filling up with ex-PRIistas, many of whom are no more than second-rate political hacks who felt thwarted within the PRI. The national leadership of the PRD has made it clear that while it is willing to use popular outrage at neo-liberal policies as a battering ram against the PRI’s political intransigence, it has no intention of seriously obstructing the imposition of neo-liberal policies. Cardenas’s term as Mayor of Mexico City is clearly a test of whether the PRD is capable of carrying out the ruling

elites' directives while simultaneously cooling the militancy of the popular movements that are a significant part of their electoral base.

The weak link in this plan are the indigenous communities, particularly in the poorer states of Southern Mexico. They have demonstrated quite clearly their willingness to turn towards revolutionary means to ensure their rightful place in Mexican society. It remains to be seen whether the sympathy they have in many other sectors can be transformed into effective political solidarity and whether they have the organizational capacity to fight and win. The Zapatista march on Mexico City was an important development in both these areas. It dramatically broadened the Zapatistas' base of support and threw at least some of that support behind the FZLN and the CNI. Rather than coming to Mexico City to declare their eagerness to negotiate with the government or to transform themselves into a peaceful political force, the Zapatistas came to demand compliance with earlier agreements and reaffirm their determination to wage a revolutionary war if that compliance was not forthcoming.

Return to San Cristobal

The Zapatista delegation returned to San Cristobal on September 19 from their trip to the capital city exhausted but obviously excited and moved by the open-armed reception they received in Mexico City. The positive response from the people of their country throughout their journey reaffirmed the belief that "no estan solos" in their struggle for liberty, justice and dignity. While the chants of "Zapata vive! La lucha sigue!" were a little less ferocious because of fatigue, the determination in their voices was even stronger. As they eagerly climbed into their trucks and busses to return to their villages, one could imagine the lively tales, reports and stories the Zapatista delegates would share with their communities over the coming days.

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