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The Zapatistas and education

Workers Solidarity Movement

4 November 2008

This interview with a Zapatista Educational Promote was carried out in the autonomous and rebel Zapatista community of Morelia, Mexico.

This area of Chiapas have been in rebellion since the 1st of January 1994 and during this time the rebel movement has constructed a new education system. The interviewer is a WSM member who lives outside of Ireland.

What is most important to us as promoters of education is that the children are conscious of their situation and free. Their own style and ways of expression are also respected. We don't make distinctions between pupils who know more and those who know less, nor between the clever and those less so. Neither does there exist individualism, it is a collective education. We don't look for personal triumph as individuals but as a team. The children are therefore better at their studies as they must share these skills with everyone else. There aren't any quizzes or competitions to see who can do a specific task better.

Introduction

This interview was carried out informally in the autonomous and rebel Zapatista community of Morelia in one of the canteens set up for Meeting II between the Zapatista Towns and the Towns

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of the World which was held there and hosted by the EZLN in July 2007 and has been only recently translated into English. The Educational Promoter being interviewed, whom we will refer to as Mr. A as his identity cannot be revealed for security reasons, was previously a teacher in the national educational system, a man of around 70 years of age (although he was unwilling to reveal his true age), whose humbleness is clearly reflected in his speech. But I must say that his charisma and his emotion shown during this interview made my hairs stand on end.

It is worthwhile to mention in this introduction that for me, personally, this interview was an honour and ended up being one of the best moments of the Meetings. Speaking with him about his life, apart from during the interview itself, I managed to find out more details of his devotion to the popular movements. Mr. A was part of the teachers' trade union movement in the 1950s, 60s and 70s including the killings in the Plaza de Tlatelolco, Mexico City, where in 1968 the government riddled hundreds of protesters with bullets. He was a member of the CNTE (National Coordinating Committee of Educational Workers), a democratic union of teachers that was the result of the division of the corrupt and extremely hierarchical SNTE (National Trade Union of Educational Workers). He also joined other (secret) revolutionary movements that took them to Cuba to meet Che Guevara in person and also the leading military members of the Estado Cubano that years early overthrew Fulgencio Batista.

Q: Do the different “caracoles”(Zapatista regions) provide consistency between them within the contents taught to students? For example, are the same things taught in the different caracoles in relation to history or politics?

A: First of all, they generally teach the history of each of the communities after consulting the older generation, followed by the municipality's history and lastly that of the state, the country, the continent and the world. They emphasize to the children the importance of learning their community's history, the place where

they come from. It usually consists of stories that don't appear in the textbooks because they are very specific. Furthermore, the official stories always miss out details that they don't want people to know.

With regards to politics, the students are taught the philosophy of the Zapatista movement. All the Zapatista slogans are explained in simple terms and in their own language. For example, in Oventik, where I am an educational promoter, we use Spanish and Tzotzil in class. They also analyse the current situation. Why are they so poor? What causes so much poverty?

Q: So, there is unity?

A: I'm not sure if there is unity within all the caracoles because the people themselves vary depending on the area and the weather, along with the conditions in general. On top of this, each caracol has its problems, for example, here in Morelia where the situation with the paramilitary is very delicate, with occasional aggressions, whilst in Oventik, although the problem also exists there, it isn't so pronounced.

Q: Yes well here, for example, we have heard about the case of the municipality of Lucio Cabanas where about two months ago the paramilitary threatened the population. Is that true?

A: Well, I actually don't really know that much about the Northern area. I can talk more about Caracol II, Oventik. But yes, it is true that from the information that we receive here, there are conflicts in the area.

Q: But in Oventik, it's been quite a while since anything similar has happened with the paramilitary, isn't that right?

A: The paramilitary sometimes threaten us, mainly when the weather is unsettled, when it rains for example. They use it as an advantage to turn up because it ensures that everyone is grouped together in the same place. What the people do, if they have to, is leave the caracol and take refuge in specific places that exist in the mountains for this purpose.

Q: In your opinion what makes the Zapatista educational project different to the national one? What are the main characteristics that make this project unique?

A: Here we use ideas from pedagogues such as Pablo Freire from Brazil. Well, in fact some educational promoters on reading his ideas, subsequently apply them albeit subconsciously. They are not obliged to follow his model. It focuses on the need to raise awareness in the children and not only teach them the facts. In this way, over and above teaching them something, it makes them aware of the reasons behind their struggle and their economic, social and political situation. For this reason, it is similar to Pablo Freire's thinking. I would even dare to say that utopia, which normally in many cases is only an unattainable dream, is becoming reality in all the different projects in the Zapatista regions such as for example, in education, health or independence in general.

Q: That was actually my next question, if you applied libertarian pedagogy knowledge of Pablo Freire's style or similar.

A: In reality, they are overlappings but we would never tell the children for example that we are using a particular model or start to talk directly about Pablo Freire or other pedagogues. What is most important to us as promoters of education is that the children are conscious of their situation and free. Their own style and ways of expression are also respected. We don't make distinctions between pupils who know more and those who know less, nor between the clever and those less so. Neither does there exist individualism, it is a collective education. We don't look for personal triumph as individuals but as a team. The children are therefore better at their studies as they must share these skills with everyone else. There aren't any quizzes or competitions to see who can do a specific task better. That doesn't exist here.

Q: So, you would say that competitiveness is avoided and sharing and solidarity are more widely promoted.....

A: Yes, exactly.

Translated by S. Henderson. I would like to give special thanks to Lucero Mendiazabal, from the CMR (Group of Mexicans Resident in Barcelona), for her help in the preparation of the questions and for introducing me to Mr. A and giving me the opportunity to carry out this interview.

Q: Apart from the economic problems due to a lack of resources, what are the main problems that affront the Zapatista educational project?

A: There are many problems, the biggest being the insecurity and the distrust that provokes the fear of knowing that any moment the paramilitary can turn up. It's a constant threat.

Another problem is that the promoters learn along the way and they don't have the expertise nor do they possess the teaching techniques. They learn everything as they go along and they continue inquiring and learning.

Q: That was also actually the answer to another question. What kind of training do the educational promoters have?

A: With regards to the Caracol of Oventik for example, there they built the Secondary School with the aim of training the promoters of education. It was given this name through 'uses and customs'. There were other people who preferred the name "Cultural Centre of Learning for Promoters" or something like that, but as the majority knew that after Primary came Secondary, well the name was left as it was. At the start it was only used to train the Promoters of Education but now it's also used to train Promoters of Health, Business, Communication, etc.

Q: So the training is designed towards autonomy? Does it fit into that category?

A: Yes, exactly.

Q: I also understand that they sometimes receive external help for training. I heard from a volunteer that the aid goes to La Garrucha area for a week or so every three months with the aim of helping the promoters, is that right?

A: Yes, in Oventik we have had what we call 'companions'. We don't call them educational advisors because we believe that here there isn't anyone who knows more or less than anyone else. During this accompaniment both the promoter and the companion assist each other. It seems to me like the most democratic idea where there is no difference in levels: this is what he knows and this is

what he doesn't. No one teaches nobody, they merely share their knowledge.

Q: I have realised that you, the Zapatistas, take a lot of care when it comes to choosing your words, for example, the use of the name 'promoter' rather than teacher or like right now with the definition of a companion.

A: Yes, we emphasize that hierarchies don't exist and that people are more or less equal.

Q: So, would you say that the language used helps to obtain that horizontality to the system?

A: Yes, for example, the children always refer to the promoters by their name and not as teacher, just as the promoters don't call them pupils. It establishes a more personal relationship, like between friends, where the promoter doesn't see the children as ignorant youngsters but as peers that need help with their studies.

Q: How many years have you been with this project?

A: I arrived in Oventik in April 2001, more than six years ago. It was in 2002 when I was accepted as a promoter of education. For a while beforehand, I was in the school library which was something brand new for the communities. They didn't know what a book was. They are new things for them that they would never have imagined existed but now they are incorporated into their lives: libraries, computers, Internet, etc. This includes books which before, where merely objects to them. Now they know that books have a purpose, with an author, an index etc. They analyse them and they get to know them. It takes a lot of work because it's not easy.

Q: I imagine that they will take very good care in the selection of books in the library and that they don't use state textbooks.

A: In fact, we do use books edited by the state but not as textbooks, only for reference and for consultation, for example, to consult biographies or to find geographical points.

Q: Since they say that everyone is always learning, after all these years what have you learnt? What have you taken from this experience?

A: For me, I have learnt a lot. When I arrived here, I had a bourgeois idea of the city that I would come to teach or share my knowledge and it has turned out to be the opposite. I am the one who has learnt the most, not only at an educational level but also about life, about collective living, about the organization that they have. For me, it is a very good experience and that is why I'm still here. I'm living and enjoying my last years with pleasure. I'm not just waiting there in the city with all my comforts.

Q: Would you say that in the city there is more alienation and here in the rural world, there is a larger sense of family and of the community?

A: Yes, of course, all of that. There is also a lot of respect. As Eduardo Galeano once said, "the Zapatistas are men and women that have helped me grow." That is exactly what I would say. They have helped me grow and gain a sense of tranquility that makes me useful. I feel useful. I feel useful and happy to be here.

Q: And what is the thing that gives you most satisfaction after so many years? The progress of a student?

A: Well, I wouldn't say that it was satisfaction on a personal level. I feel satisfied by the cooperation and that some of my colleagues that have now progressed to Secondary, form part of authorities or are now promoters. People that only three or four years ago were in Secondary School and now I see them in their communities working as promoters or as part of the Council or for an authority. That is really pleasing because you can see that they learn quickly, day-by-day, with an incredible ease. I feel true admiration for them and I feel satisfied that I have been a witness to such advances.