

Thousands of rebels from all over the world meet in Spain

Workers Solidarity Movement

Autumn 1997

REGULARS READERS of Workers Solidarity will have read of the Gathering in Chiapas, Mexico last year hosted by the EZLN (Zapatistas) attended by 3,000 rebels from all over the planet. A second gathering 'for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism' was held this August in the Spanish state. Here we interview Irish Mexico Group activist and WSM member Andrew Flood, who helped organise and attended this gathering.

First off can you explain the rather long winded title of these meetings, what is neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is essentially the latest form capitalism has taken, what many people would call Thatcherism. It's not just a British phenomenon though, and elsewhere' particularly in Latin America it's called neoliberalism. The liberalism referred to is economic liberalism, the idea that there should be no restrictions on the 'right' of business to make a profit. To use an old example this is similar to the laissez-faire policy of the British government at the time of the Irish famine (1846–49) that saw the 'rights of landlords to get their rent by exporting food as more important than keeping people alive. This economic system obviously has no room for humanity hence the gatherings identifying themselves as being opposite this by being 'for Humanity'

So these gatherings consist of everyone who opposes neoliberalism, isn't this too broad a set of people to have a workable meeting!

It's a little bit more complex than this — because the Gatherings were initiated by the Zapatistas the people they attracted were overwhelmingly those who have rejected the methods of the authoritarian left. That is, they have rejected the concept of the 'vanguard party' and the idea that a free society can be introduced by that party seizing power. This is not to say that it is anarchist dominated, anarchists are a small but visible minority at these gatherings alongside Marxists who are attempting to come up with an anti-authoritarian Marxism, trade union & community activists, and even some radical religious people.

What these people have in common is a recognition of the need for international co-operation between struggles. This has been expressed as seeking "...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", but one which "doesn't have a central head or decision maker; it has no central command or hierarchies."

This still seems very broad, how can you hope to have an international organisation with so many desperate groups?

The aim of the gatherings is not an international organisation as such. On reading the references to “the network’ what is being referred to is a network that already exists. It exists because all but the most sectarian groups already mobilise] against the repression of other struggles.

The international campaign against the planned execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal is one example, probably very few of the activists involved agree with’ politics of MOVE or even know much about them but this doesn’t stop them acting in solidarity with Mumia. But, as those involved around this will know, the big initial problem was hearing about the case and getting up-to-date information about it. The idea of the Gatherings is not to construct yet another ‘political international’ (the 5th, 6th or whatever; but rather to improve the network of solidarity and communication between struggles.

Is this working, a lot of people said so many people only went to last year’s gathering because it was being staged by an armed force in the jungle and so had a romantic revolutionary image?

There maybe some truth in this, but what’s wrong with romance anyway! Certainly in the organising of this gathering this was an issue that concerned me, would anyone come without the Zapatistas running the show. It was quickly clear that there was a core of dedicated activists, the three European organising meetings attracted over 100 people and reports kept coming back about how much work the people in Spain were doing. However, I was promoting the gathering on the internet, trying initially to get Organisational Committees formed in English language countries. From this there did seem to be a lack of people willing to find the time to do this sort of work, so those who did volunteer had far more work then they could cope with.

Then two weeks before the gathering we found out only about 600 people had signed up, this would have represented a major disaster. In the final week this rose until the day before the gathering it was around the 2000 mark which was better but still well down on last year. When I got to Spain however it was clear that a lot of people were arriving without having bothered to pre-register.

While this was very irritating for the organisers as it made their job much more difficult it did mean that in the end between 3,000 and 4,000 people attended. Better still, despite the problems of trying to subsidise travel costs from the ‘3rd world’, and all the problems of the racist ‘fortress Europe’ immigration controls, there were people from over 50 countries there including many African ones and almost all of Latin America.

Both these figures were an improvement on 1996 so I think its safe to say that there is a definite potential for this network to grow without relying on any one movement or bunch of celebrities to promote it.

Another criticism made of last years encounter was the presence of number of high profile liberals like Daneille Mitterand (widow of the former French President), who were given celebrity status. Was this problem at this year’s encounter?

Yeah, this caused a lot of conflict at last year’s encounter. Some of the French delegation wanted to mud bomb Mitterand, and Marcos (a well known EZLN spokesperson) called a mid-night meeting of the delegation organisers in the jungle to try get the other delegations to talk the French around.

This year though, the Europe groups had made the decision in advance that there would be no special status except for whatever delegates the Zapatistas sent over and as far as I saw, this

decision was stuck to. Indeed, I don't think any 'celebrities' turned up demanding special status, I think they were the one group at last year's encounter that was there primarily to have their photo taken near Marcos.

So did actual Zapatistas go to the encounter, how come they were allowed to leave Mexico in their Balaclavas?

Two delegates came from the EZLN, not from their army command but from the civilian support communities. I believe they are people who had lived in Guadalupe Tepic, the town that held the first Mexican encounter and which the army took revenge on after the 1995 encounter by burning down the structures built for this and occupying the town. Last year in Chiapas we passed through this still abandoned town and already the jungle has started to grow back over it.

I don't know how they got to Spain but a communiqué from the EZLN saying they were sending delegates said they might be hiking across the Bering straits (between Siberia and Alaska) or swimming across the Atlantic! Symbolically their presence was very important, both as an example of the human cost of the uprising and of another breach in the wall the army has tried to erect around Chiapas to isolate the EZLN. The only special status they received really was the protection of the delegates attending the gathering and the 'privilege' of travelling continuously between the sites it was being held to read the statements from the EZLN. As we were arriving in Barcelona they made the simple gesture of going down every carriage in our train to shake hands with those of us who were awake but there were none of the double handed firm grips of Irish politicians.

You referred to the train to Barcelona, what was the technical side of organisation of the gathering like?

Although at the time it sometimes seemed chaotic, particularly at the start in Madrid, in hindsight I think this was a remarkable achievement on behalf of the Spanish organisers. Particularly when you consider they were unpaid volunteers with very little infrastructure and a real shoe-string budget. (1st world delegates each gave 90 dollars towards the cost). From this they had to arrange accommodation, food and transport around Spain for an unknown number of people. Then there were also the almost constant fiestas, demonstrations and all the problems with registration.

In Madrid we registered in a school, slept in one of three sports halls or in tents on a football pitch and partied in a bullring. We left Madrid for Barcelona in a specially chartered train (apparently the organisers first struck a deal with the railway workers' trade union and then went to management with this deal) where people met or stayed in squats, schools and community centres before taking another train right across and down Spain to Andalusia where we again slept in schools and met as guests of the farm workers' trade union on an occupied agricultural estate. And of course when some of us went to Barcelona other people were heading off to other areas of the Spanish state.

Barcelona and Andalusia are names that to anarchists are deeply connected with the Spanish Revolution of 1936, was there a feeling of a connection at the gathering?

This was something I certainly felt and that quite a lot of the delegates commented on. At the march through Madrid at the start for instance, one of the Spanish delegates told me that the guy holding what appeared to be an off-colour Spanish flag was actually holding the flag of the Spanish Republic of those years. Many people wondered if the march itself was the most international one since the International Brigades had marched out of the city in 1938. The

morning we got to Barcelona some of the Italian and Spanish delegates had gone to the border post that the last people had fled across in 1939 to unfurl some of the banners of the encounter.

On a demonstration in defence of one of the squats in Barcelona we sung 'A las Barricadas', one of the anarchist anthems from the revolution, and later the Italians showed a video of footage and interviews of those who had fought on the republican side, some with the anarchists during the Civil War. Probably the most enduring images I have of the encounter is of a local old man who, on seeing us march through the streets of a tiny town in Andulacia, stood outside e his house waving both arms above his head in joy. We'd obviously triggered some memory for him of his youth when perhaps he had been part of the collectivisation of the large estates in this area or the hastily formed militia that left for the front to fight the fascists.

Was there much of a visible anarchist presence at the gathering?

The most visible were a contingent of 30 anarchists who had travelled with a huge red and black banner from a small city in Greece. This was the largest banner on the demonstration in Madrid that marked the start of the gathering but unfortunately the only local organisation to turn out in force for this demonstration was the Spanish Communist Party, some of whom were carrying Fidel Castro placards. There were anarchists there from all over Europe, east and west, and a scattering from outside Europe, but they had come as individuals or just in connection with various social centres. There was a real lack of participants from the major anarchist organisations.

I think the European anarchist organisations missed a golden opportunity to reach wider international audience interested in anarchism. I'm not sure why this is, I know some may have been exhausted for the organisation of the European march against unemployment but other groups involved in this march, particularly Italian autonomists, had turned up in force.

The reasons why this happened are worth thinking about, I suspect in part it may be due to an overemphasis on ideological purity on the part of many of the organisations, a lack of emphasis on internationalism on others (in terms of actually putting in effort and not just hot air) and finally a tendency on the part of many of the large organisations to confine their work to a narrow range of similar organisations. Another factor I think is the difficulty the anarchist movement is having in adjusting to the new situation after the collapse of Leninism and expanding into the vacuum this has left.

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