

<https://npa31.org/spip.php?article836>



Zapatista Turn

One Step Forward

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV369 - July-August 2005 -

Publication date: Saturday 9 July 2005

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The Chiapas Red Alert called by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in mid-June set alarm bells ringing among the left and social movements in Latin America and beyond. In the event the Red Alert turned out to be a precautionary security measure, as the clandestine committee which leads the movement called the army, its political cadres and the leaders of the Chiapas autonomous municipalities to a 'consulta' - in effect a full-scale congress of the movement, to discuss a major political turn.

The outcome was a huge majority in favour of the 'Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacondona', which sets the movement on a new course of trying to build unity with other sections of the left and global justice movement in Mexico and internationally. To that end the EZLN intends to send a delegation to all parts of Mexico to engage in a broad-scale dialogue, with the aim of trying to forge a movement "for a programme of the left and a new constitution."

What lies behind this new turn by the EZLN and what will its proposals mean? Above all, the turn is designed to get the Zapatista movement out of its political isolation that has led it into an impasse. To better understand that we have to look at what has happened to the movement in the last seven years.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/zaps46.jpg>]

Between March and July of 1997 there were many attacks on the civilian communities of the Zapatistas. On December 22, 1997, a paramilitary group raided the town of Acteal, largely populated by Zapatista sympathisers. In this incident 45 unarmed people were massacred. Nine of the victims were men, twenty-one were women, and fifteen were children. The worst part about this massacre was that it was carried out by troops that had been recruited by the military from that area.

The Mexican government used the Acteal massacre as an excuse to heighten militarisation in Chiapas. On April 11 and May 1 of 1998, the Mexican government sent troops to violently dismantle two of the thirty-eight Zapatista autonomous zones. After these events, the Governor of Chiapas Roberto Albores Guillen stated, "I will finish off the autonomous municipalities."

The EZLN itself, deep in the selva, was unable to reach the villages quickly enough to prevent several dozens murders, rapes, beatings, destruction of crops and theft of the campesinos' money.

Political Counter-offensive

After a period of silence, in 1999 the EZLN signalled a political offensive to defeat the military attacks; Subcommandante Marcos published his famous text 'Masks and Silences' which called the Mexican left and 'civil society' to defend the Zapatistas. The EZLN launched a nationwide referendum for basic social change, and over a thousand Zapatistas toured the country. Marcos himself addressed crowds in Mexico City. The scene seemed set for a new dialogue with the incoming right-wing PAN [1] government and its president Vicente Fox, elected in 2000.

Despite election promises the Fox government refused to implement the provisions of the San Andreas accords, which had promised the Zapatista communities autonomy and land rights. The villages remain penned in by the militarisation of the area, and conflict with state authorities is frequent. Some of the Chiapas mountain communities are loyal to the PRI [2] and they form the support basis of right-wing paramilitary groups, which themselves are a

source of constant harassment and fear for the Zapatista municipalities.

As a consequence of the Fox government's refusal to negotiate the Zapatistas "took their bat and ball and went home." Despairing of a political breakthrough the EZLN leadership decided to concentrate on politico-military reorganisation and improving the lives of the Zapatista base communities.

Autonomous Municipalities

Progressively the EZLN leadership has tried to hand decision-making over to local level, encouraging the autonomous municipalities and good government juntas to take the reigns of decision-making. According to Marcos the last few years have also involved an effort to develop a new generation of political cadres.

Self-organisation and egalitarian principles, as well as a considerable effort by Mexican and international NGOs, some of whom have permanent workers in the area, have achieved significant improvements in the health, education and nutrition of local people.

This social and political progress of course does not amount to *solving* the basic problems of the Chiapas indigenous peoples, which have their roots in the poverty and lack of democracy at an all-Mexico level, although historically these things have hit the doubly- and trebly-exploited indigenous communities particularly hard.

Frente Zapatista

In fact the Zapatista movement has always recognised that its objectives can only be achieved at an all-Mexico level, and indeed that the EZLN struggle is part of the international fight against neoliberal capitalism. However the position of Marcos and the EZLN leadership in relation to the fight for a reconstituted and united Mexican left has been very mixed, if not broadly negative.

In 1995 the Zapatistas took the initiative to form the nation wide Frente Zapatista (FZLN), which rapidly attracted many organised leftists as well as individuals. This could have become the basis for a new broad left party. But in the end the EZLN leadership vetoed such a development.

In a letter about the Sixth Declaration Marcos hints this was because the EZLN had promised its base communities that the movement would always be of the indigenous peoples and for the indigenous peoples, not something broader that could lose its focus on their needs and demands. Some commentators say Marcos feared losing control of the movement.

Whatever the reason, the refusal to turn the FZLN into a broad left party-type formation sounded its rapid death-knell as an effective political force. It survives as a "Zapatista solidarity campaign", without much in the way of members or influence.

Mexican civil society has mobilised periodically to defend the Zapatistas, but it does not need the FZLN to do it. On the contrary, as always, the fundamental loyalty of leftist activists and sympathisers will be to political organisations that put forward an overall and more-or-less coherent global political alternative. The tightly-controlled FZLN can never be that.

All-Mexico Political Leadership?

Some have argued that providing Mexico-wide left political leadership is not the responsibility of the Zapatistas, who in any case will find it very difficult to provide this from a small and isolated corner of the country. In [a 1999 interview](#), Jaime Gonzalez said of the Zapatistas:

“Now, how is it that this enormously popular movement has not been able to sustain any of its more general political initiatives? In my opinion the answer is simple: they do not have a clear strategy to win. They don't know what to do with the elections and they don't have the slightest idea of a programme for the rest of Mexico. And let me say, that's not their responsibility. How can an indigenous uprising in one corner of southern Mexico have an elaborated programme for the whole of Mexican society? For the people in the north, for the economy, for an anti-capitalist transition? You could say it like this: the Zapatistas pose problems which they are inherently incapable of solving themselves.” [3]

Jaime Gonzalez's comments contain a hint of self-contradiction. If the Zapatistas are such an enormously popular movement, they do have the potential to begin to give overall political leadership to the Mexican left, at least in co-operation with others. If they have the will and political vision (a 'programme' of course, but also sensible unitary tactics).

In 1998-2000 the EZLN played a very active political role, part of its political counter-offensive against the government, in giving all-out political support to the student strikers at Mexico City's giant university UNAM (100,000 students), in the struggle against the imposition of student fees. They refused to give up 100% support for the UNAM strikers, even when it became clear the students' ultra-left leadership was leading the struggle to defeat

In addition, for the first time, masked Zapatistas participated in Mexico City demonstrations - that of the SME union electricity workers, battling to defeat privatisation and in the 1999 May Day march. These initiatives seemed to indicate a willingness to take on a broader political role, but this was never followed up after the failure of the Fox government to rekindle the peace process started by the San Andreas accords.

PRD Obstacle

Building a new broad anti-capitalist party would be tremendously important in the Mexican context because of the complete dominance of the left by the centre-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). A late-1980s split from the PRI, the PRD sucked in the Communist Party and its pressure indirectly helped to capsize the main Trotskyist organisation, the PRT, in the early 1990s. The PRD is nostalgic for the old nationalist-corporatist traditions of the PRI in the 1930s and 1940s, and was formed in opposition to the slide by the PRI into pro-American neoliberalism under ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

But over the years the PRD had drifted rightwards. There is little hint of anything resembling a radical left within it. It remains a huge obstacle to any socialist or anti-capitalist representation of the workers, peasants and indigenous people. Only the Zapatistas have the popularity to be the driving force for the construction of an alternative. The main problem with the PRD - a very familiar one - is that despite drifting to the right and being recently caught up in a major corruption scandal, at an electoral level it is the only credible alternative to the right wing, the PRI and PAN.

Its candidate for president in 2006, the highly popular Mexico City mayor Manuel Lopez Obrador, was the victim of an attempt by the PRI and the PAN to disqualify him because of the PRD's corruption scandal, a move defeated by a

silent march of two million through the streets of the capital. The dominance of the PRD on the left cannot be defeated without building a credible alternative.

How should we assess this new turn, in terms of the task of building a nation-wide left alternative? The Sixth Declaration says:

“We are going to go to listen to, and talk directly with, without intermediaries or mediation, the simple and humble of the Mexican people, and, according to what we hear and learn, we are going to go about building, along with those people who, like us, are humble and simple, a national program of struggle, but a program which will be clearly of the left, or anti-capitalist, or anti-neoliberal, or for justice, democracy and liberty for the Mexican people.”

So far, so good. The text continues:

“We are also letting you know that the EZLN will establish a policy of alliances with non-electoral organisations and movements which define themselves, in theory and practice, as being of the left, in accordance with the following conditions: Not to make agreements from above to be imposed below, but to make accords to go together to listen and to organise outrage.

“Not to raise movements which are later negotiated behind the backs of those who made them, but to always take into account the opinions of those participating. Not to seek gifts, positions, advantages, public positions, from the Power or those who aspire to it, but to go beyond the election calendar. Not to try to resolve from above the problems of our Nation, but to build FROM BELOW AND FOR BELOW an alternative to neoliberal destruction, an alternative of the left for Mexico.

“Yes to reciprocal respect for the autonomy and independence of organisations, for their methods of struggle, for their ways of organising, for their internal decision making processes, for their legitimate representations. And yes to a clear commitment for joint and co-ordinated defense of national sovereignty, with intransigent opposition to privatisation attempts of electricity, oil, water and natural resources.

“In other words, we are inviting the unregistered political and social organizations of the left, and those persons who lay claim to the left and who do not belong to registered political parties, to meet with us, at the time, place and manner in which we shall propose at the proper time, to organize a national campaign, visiting all possible corners of our Patria, in order to listen to and organise the word of our people. It is like a campaign, then, but very otherly, because it is not electoral.”

Party, Programme, Power

This contains a lot that is very sensible, and it represents a new, giant and exciting opportunity for the Mexican left. Even if the objective were explicitly to build a new left party-type organisation, it would be sensible to start building it from the ‘bottom up’, by dialogue, alliances and consultation, and not by artificial diktat from above.

However, in Marcos' discourse, and that of his main advisors like former Trotskyist leader Sergio Rodríguez Lascano, there is a constant ambiguity about the notion of parties, programmes and strategy. This revolves around the question of “changing the world without taking power.” Are all parties inherently corrupt and manipulative, just because of the party form? Is all participation in elections to be deplored and must the left be anti-electoral in principle? Should the left fight for the workers, peasants and indigenous people to form their own national

government?

If the EZLN proceeds by building struggle alliances from below, but refuses to build a national political organisation and refuses to countenance any electoral challenge from the left, it will cede major political space to the PRD and the right-wing, fail in its objectives and lose another major opportunity. This is a political turn that could revitalise the left, or it crumble into nothing.

An intriguing footnote is the ELZN's promise to build closer links with the left internationally and its offer of material aid to militant activists worldwide. For example, the Declaration says:

“And we are also going to make an agreement with the women's crafts co-operatives in order to send a good number of bordados, embroidered pieces, to the Europes which are perhaps not yet Union, and perhaps we'll also send some organic coffee from the zapatista co-operatives, so that they can sell it and get a little money for their struggle. And, if it isn't sold, then they can always have a little cup of coffee and talk about the anti-neoliberal struggle, and if it's a bit cold then they can cover themselves up with the zapatista bordados, which do indeed resist quite well being laundered by hand and by rocks, and, besides, they don't run in the wash.”

For sure the Subcommandante hasn't lost his sense of humour!

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/ph-2.jpg>]

[1] National Action party, a right-wing neoliberal party formed in the 1950s.

[2] The exquisitely named Institutional Revolutionary Party, for 70 years the dominant party in Mexico, until its defeat in the 2000 presidential elections

[3] Jaime Gonzalez is a leader of the LUS, the League for Socialist Unity.