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# Mexican Wave

By Mihalis Mentinis

Since the 2006 Oaxaca revolt state repression in Mexico has contributed to popular feeling that peaceful protest has failed. Today, the country is on the threshold of a cycle of armed anti-capitalist struggle, argues Mihalis Mentinis

The repression of the protests in Oaxaca and Atenco in 2006 left people with a strong feeling of 'unfinished business' with the State. A placard in the streets of Oaxaca expressing this feeling showed an enraged Emiliano Zapata holding a gun in each hand: *Nos Vemos en 2010 Cabrones* ('See you in 2010, bastards'). It is said that there is something like a 'hundred year cycle' in Mexico with the tenth year of every century marking the beginning of a sustained revolutionary effervescence: in 1810 was the war of independence against Spanish colonial authority; in 1910, the Mexican Revolution against the dictatorship of Porfirio D  az; and 2010, an important year of change for the Mayan calendar, seems to meet all the conditions for a new Mexican Revolution - this time against capitalism. Within this atmosphere of anticipation (and preparation), the prospect of a civil war or a revolution dominates the horizon of the future, and Subcomandante Marcos has also warned: 'we are anticipating a great uprising or a civil war.'<sup>i</sup>

The Zapatista revolt in 1994 managed to irreversibly open the Pandora's Box for Mexico. Although many were rather premature at that time in their celebrations of the revolt as the 'New Mexican Revolution', Marcos's rectifying statement that it was a revolution (with a small 'r') which made Revolution possible was on the right track. The revolt unleashed proletarian forces and had a catalytic effect for the formation of new and reactivation of existing indigenous and *campesino* organisations as well as politico-military groups which have now become forces to reckon with in Mexican politics. After the State's unmitigated repression of popular protests in Atenco and Oaxaca, the politico-military groups, in particular, have grown much stronger than before, and their belligerence against the State and capitalism attracts more and more members and supporters from the growing number of people who have lost hope that anything essential can ever be changed by peaceful means. Mexico is on the threshold of a new cycle of struggle that reassumes armed and combative actions as indispensable for any fundamental social and political change.

In March of this year in the mountains of Guerrero, some dozens of *campesinos*, some of them representatives of groups and organisations, met in order to announce their integration into the ranks of the 'Insurgent People's Revolutionary Army' (ERPI). The ERPI announced the formation of new columns composed exclusively of indigenous rebels and declared that they are going to engage in combative action in order to fight capitalism, defend Mexican oil and natural resources, and fight for the indigenous rights which are circumvented and violated by the repressive government of Felipe Calder  n. The participants in the meeting declared their total lack of trust to all political parties and expressed their conviction that the solutions to their problems pass through the armed struggle. As a participant explained, 'the pacific way has never worked, exactly the opposite, day after day things become worse. We are not going to wait till 2010 in order to start the revolution in Guerrero,' the ERPI declared, 'we have already started it here.'<sup>ii</sup>

Last year, another politico-military group, the 'Revolutionary Popular Army' (EPR), claimed credit for two series of bombings of various pipelines of the State owned oil company (PEMEX) in various states of central Mexico in July and September. In the second series of attacks in Veracruz and Tlaxcala, the group announced that its 'military units' had undertaken the attacks in order to force the

government to hand over two of its militants who disappeared that same year after they were arrested in Oaxaca. One bomb was discovered intact with a message attached: 'Alive you took them, alive we want them back'; an apparent reference to the missing militants. The EPR, however, has a national agenda too and the bombings were meant to be a strong blow to the president Felipe Calderón (who made security a centrepiece of his presidency), and the neoliberal plans of his government. Although the EPR has only a couple of thousand insurgents and no capacity to overthrow the government militarily, the 'prolonged people's war' that it has declared against 'the anti-people government' has the capacity to strike the State at vital points. The attacks in Veracruz and Tlaxcala resulted in a 25 percent drop in the supply of natural gas available to consumers across Mexico, caused hundreds of millions of dollars in production losses for PEMEX and seriously affected the private sector. Some dozen major companies including Honda Motor Co., Kellogg Co., and Volkswagen had to suspend or scale back operations due to gas shortage. In the case of the Volkswagen plant in Puebla, for example, production had to be suspended for four days resulting in the loss of production of 7,200 vehicles. The bombings were a warning to the government as well as potential buyers of PEMEX that the intended privatisation of the company would not be an easy process. Given the virtual impossibility of guarding and protecting PEMEX's vast fuel-distribution network, the EPR has managed to make a very clear point and introduce itself as a force to be taken seriously in Mexican politics.

### Pemex bombing

10 September 2007: aftermath of the bombing of a Pemex pipeline near Maltrata in Veracruz

Two years ago, in November 2006, a front of five politico-military groups with a presence in several Mexican states took responsibility for bombs planted in the electoral tribunal, the headquarters of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), and a bank branch. In their communiqué the rebels declared that these politico-military actions would continue against national and multinational companies and State institutions responsible for the 'neoliberal institutional violence' undertaken against Mexican people. They demanded, among other things, the resignation of the PRI backed and fraudulently elected governor of Oaxaca Ulises Ruiz, the withdrawal of the 'federal forces of occupation' from the region, and the immediate release of those arrested or disappeared in Atenco and Oaxaca.<sup>iii</sup>

These are only a few small instances of a new cycle of armed confrontation, in which attacks on prisons, military headquarters and army convoys, sabotage operations against State institutions, but also peaceful demonstrations, protests, occupations and sit-ins have become more and more frequent. In a country where political disappearances, torture, rape and murder of activists is an everyday phenomenon, and where corruption guarantees almost absolute impunity for corrupt State officials and paramilitaries, groups like those mentioned above are nurtured and supported by an increasing number of impoverished *campesinos* with no trust in institutional politics.

An important characteristic of the new cycle of struggle is the radicalisation of sectors of the proletariat, both in the cities and rural areas, that one way or another previously maintained some kind of alliance with or faith in the institutional 'Left'. These sectors have now broken from the leftist Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD), and reject it as another mechanism of the State. One of the most recent reasons, albeit not the only one, is that in various Mexican states local bosses have restructured their power relations by switching alliances and linking themselves with the PRD. As a result of this, in places where the PRD has taken power it has tended to maintain the same anti-popular policies and repressive methods like the other parties. In April 2004, for example, in Zinacantan municipality of

Chiapas, the PRD authorities commanded an armed attack against a peaceful demonstration by Zapatista supporters demanding access to drinking water. The attack left many wounded and hundreds of refugees, and resulted in a total break between the Zapatistas and the PRD. In a similar case in the state of Guerrero, the PRD government of Zeferino Torreblanca (a businessman) responded with violence to a demonstration against the construction of a hydroelectric megaproject. The lukewarm and often indifferent reaction of the national PRD leadership to all this has added further to the tension, and has greatly disillusioned people.<sup>iv</sup>

## Oaxaca March

20 May 2008: teachers march through the streets of Oaxaca

The break with the PRD was intensified and given a national dimension during the Zapatista *otra campaña* (the 'Other Campaign') in 2006, during the run up to the national election, when Marcos fiercely criticised the PRD and its candidate López Obrador for selling out to financial interests and making alliance with capitalists, calling Obrador the 'left arm of the Right'. The betrayal of the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO) by the PRD the same year and its clear alliance with and support for the political class, disillusioned many more. Many of the APPO participants for example, although they insist in a struggle with peaceful means, have completely broken from PRD and reject electoral politics altogether.<sup>v</sup> The confrontation with Obrador and PRD has forced many of the supporters/allies that the PRD and the Zapatistas shared in common to take sides and chose what kind of politics they opt for. The Other Campaign has been indeed an important motor of radicalisation of sectors of the Mexican proletariat, and its polemic has brought to surface latent conflicts and antagonisms. The main contribution of the Other Campaign, however, has been the gradual development of a common anti-capitalist ground that has brought rural indigenous and *campesino* organisations with urban movements, independent labour unions and various socialist groups closer together. The Zapatista framing of indigenous demands within an anti-neoliberal agenda, and their recent use of the term 'capitalism' previously absent in the discourse of the movement, has been an important factor in this direction.<sup>vi</sup> It is indicative, for example, that one of the easiest decisions reached by the popular assembly in Oaxaca was precisely the one related to the need to give a clear anti-capitalist orientation to their struggle.<sup>vii</sup>

If the Other Campaign has been significant in inciting proletarian fight-back, Oaxaca is the name of the event (in its Badiouian sense of the term as a rupture with 'what is') that marks the new cycle of struggle. The Oaxaca commune, as it is now commonly referred to, opened up different possibilities and produced the conditions for a new dynamic cycle of struggle, building on and at the same time expanding the cycle of struggle initiated by the Zapatista revolt. In a period in which Right wingers and Leftist academics were talking about the decline of the Zapatista project and the virtual impossibility of non-taking power politics, (even mockingly dubbing Marcos the 'subcomandante' - e.g. *el 4ek*) the commune of Oaxaca showed that radical direct democracy practiced in small indigenous communities, could be taken up on a larger scale on a city level with the participation of diverse ethnic and socio-economic sectors, and render the government completely redundant; for the commune of Oaxaca, for more than six months, rendered completely redundant the local and national government.<sup>viii</sup> The APPO can be described as what Shaj-Shuja calls a 'Zone of Proletarian Development' (ZPD): a space in which various sections of the proletariat (e.g. *campesinos*, indigenous, teachers etc) learn from each other and radicalise their consciousness in the process of joint activity.<sup>ix</sup> Its consequences and effects are still to be seen.

## APPO

### APPO (Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca) poster

The importance of the Oaxaca commune lies in the fact that it has become the symbol of a successful peoples' government, and therefore a model for prefiguring the future, for imagining how a revolutionary outbreak could be. Marcos too seems to see the future of struggle in Mexico as taking the form of local uprisings and communes. When he was asked about who would lead the Revolution or civil war he talked about, he responded: 'people themselves, everybody in the place where they live, and all in a network of mutual support', and he gave the example of Oaxaca where 'there are no leaders and no caudillos; it is people who have organised themselves'. 'Like this it is going to be in the whole country' he said.<sup>x</sup> The violent repression of the APPO then, aimed, first and foremost, to prevent the example from spreading, given that people in other areas of the country had already started organising themselves in popular assemblies, and given that the APPO defined its ultimate goal as an eventual autonomous form of peoples' government for the entire state. In this atmosphere of anticipation and preparation for the future, the second round of the Other Campaign undertaken by the Zapatistas in March 2007 had as its main objectives to strengthen further the common anti-capitalist basis of the various rural and urban movements across Mexico, bring together proposals and demands from various local struggles into a 'national programme of struggle', and further strengthen solidarity and support networks in the new conditions created by the new repressive administration.

What are these conditions? Since the beginning of the Fox administration in 2000, it had become clear that Mexico was interested in strengthening ties with the US and moving away from other Latin American countries. The public rupture with Fidel Castro in the Monterrey 'poverty summit' in 2001, the Mexican candidate's cooperation with the US, against the candidate of several Latin American countries, for the position of the Secretary General of the OAS ('Organisation of American States'), the rupture with Hugo Ch vez etc all attested to Mexico's US oriented future. This agenda has been now taken up by Calder n who is interested in renewing a partnership and strengthening further ties with the US.<sup>xi</sup> Given this, it is unlikely that the government would ever risk upsetting the US by bringing on the table even one of the most basic popular demands brought up during the tortilla riots in 2007: the revision of the NAFTA's ('North American Free Trade Agreement') section on agriculture in relation to maize (the basic ingredient of the tortilla) and beans (products that enter Mexico from the US with no restrictions and are normally genetically modified threatening, *campesino* selling power and corn/bean diversity respectively). Calder n has instead opted for repression and the militarisation of the country in order to control proletarian forces. With the pretext of combating drug trafficking, check points have been set up everywhere and large army units have been dispatched to areas perceived as prone to insurrection and upheaval (e.g. Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero etc). The militarisation of the country obeys the new security dogma of Mexico; a dogma that implies the increasingly vital participation of the US in terms of strategic guidance, training of the military and the police, supply of military technology and so on. All this is accompanied by the installation in Mexico of mercenaries, private foreign security companies and the expansion and further armament of paramilitary groups. For it is certain that the increase in arms as a consequence of militarisation results in that, sooner or later, a number of these arms end up in the hands of paramilitary groups. This is the Mexican version of the 'plan Colombia' intended to intimidate, repress popular protests, imprison, torture and murder activists, perform anti-guerrilla operations and train paramilitary groups under the guise of the anti-cartel war. However, so far everything seems to suggest that Mexico's proletarians are far from being pacified and controlled.<sup>xii</sup>

Zapatista

Zapatistas masked, and armed

It is difficult to say what the future holds for Mexico. Although there is definitely no clear plan forward, it is the first time that armed and non-armed organisations and groups have come so close in their agendas. Back in 1996, when the Zapatistas enjoyed a rosy romance with the middle classes, they had arrogantly rejected the EPR's solidarity and support: 'we don't want your support, we don't need it, we don't seek it'.<sup>xiii</sup> Some years later, however, during *la Marcha* in 2001, the Zapatistas revised their position towards armed revolutionary groups, among them the ERPI and EPR, recognising their roots in Mexican social and political reality. Despite the fact that in 2005, just before setting off for the Other Campaign, the EZLN (Zapatista Army for National Liberation) made clear that it still maintains its commitment to the path of political struggle through peaceful initiatives, and announced it would not establish any kind of secret relations with political-military organisations, it is obvious that there is a rapprochement between the EZLN and other armed groups in terms of solidarity and mutual respect.<sup>xiv</sup> Marcos' solidarity gestures during the Other Campaign included a visit to a prison near the capital of Oaxaca, where many of the prisoners are kept for their alleged links with the EPR, and the unconditional active support the Zapatistas offered the APPO (APPO counted on participants and tactical but not military-support from several armed groups of the region). For their parts armed groups like the EPRI have spoken positively of the Zapatistas implying an understanding of the importance of the non-military political strategies of the latter:

we see positively the work of Subcomandante Marcos with the Zapatista Army for National Liberation in Chiapas... [T]heir work is well structured and their actions give them results'.<sup>xv</sup>

The EPR has also announced that they will not engage in any acts that could jeopardise the EZLN. In the new cycle of struggle differences among various armed and non-armed organisations have been left aside to a great extent and emphasis is instead being put on the anti-capitalist and anti-State demands, hopes and desires they all share in common. In Mexico proletarians have made a combative come back and we can aver with certainty that 'all this has just begun'.<sup>xvi</sup>

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Footnotes

i Hermann Bellinghausen: *Marcos: 'Estamos en vÃ-speras de un gran alzamiento o una guerra civil'*, *La Jornada*, 24 November 2006,

<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/11/24/index.php?section=politica&article=015n1pol>.

ii Sergio Ocampo Arista: 'en respuesta a los ataques del gobierno, indÃ-genas se suman a la lucha del ERPI', *La Jornada*, 25 March 2008,

<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/03/25/index.php?section=politica&article=012n1pol>

iii La Jornada, Tuesday, 7th November 2006: Cinco organizaciones se adjudican los bombazos,

<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/11/07/index.php?section=politica&article=007n1pol>.

iv Rosalva AÃ-da HernÃndez Castillo, 'The Indigenous Movement in Mexico: Between Electoral Politics and Local Resistance', *Latin American Perspectives*, 2006, 33: pp. 115-131.

v Luis HernÃndez Navarro, 'APPO, PRD y elecciones en Oaxaca', 22 March 2007, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/05/22/index.php?section=opinion&article=019a1pol>.

vi Mariana Mora, 'Zapatista Anti-capitalist Politics and the Other Campaign: Learning from the struggle for Indigenous rights and Autonomy', *Latin American Perspective*, 2007, 34: pp. 64-77.

vii Gustavo Esteva: 'The Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca: A Chronicle of Radical Democracy', *Latin American Perspective*, 2007, 34: pp. 129-144.

viii The 'subcomediante' pun was coined for the first time back in 1996 by the anti-Zapatista right-wing press in Mexico in order to deride Marcos, and it was employed several times since then by anti-Zapatista media. ÃzÃek has taken up the term, he misattributes its origin to Mexican Leftists, and employs it in order to convey what he sees as the lack of realism and naÃvetÃ of anti-taking power politics. See: [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/zize01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/zize01_.html).

ix Mastaneh Shah-Shuja, 2008: *Zones of Proletarian Development*, London: OpenMute.

x Hermann Bellinghausen, 2006, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/11/24/index.php?section=politica&article=015n1pol>.

xi See: Jan Rus and Miguel Tinker Salas: Introduction: Mexico 2006-2012: High Stakes, Daunting Challenges. *Latin American Perspective*, 2006, 33: pp. 5-15.

xii While writing this article, the EPR has sent out another communiquÃ refusing direct dialogue with the 'criminal government' and calling for a struggle with all means against the privatisation of PEMEX. See: Alonso Urrutia: 'El EPR reivindica la lucha armada y rechaza una rendiciÃn incondicional'. *La Jornada*, 13 May 2008. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/05/13/index.php?section=politica&article=011n1pol>

xiii EZLN 1996, 'To the Soldiers and Commanders of the Popular Revolutionary Army', [http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/ezln\\_epr\\_se96.html](http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/ezln_epr_se96.html).

xiv EZLN, 2005, 'Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle', [http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story\\_id=805](http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=805).

xv Sergio Ocampo Arista, 2008.

xvi 'All this has just begun' was EPR's warning to the government after the second bombings of PEMEX installations in 2007.

