

# THE OAXACA COMMUNE

The Other Indigenous Rebellion in Mexico

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Socialist Project  
Socialist Interventions Pamphlet Series

## Socialist Interventions Pamphlet Series

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## INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the extraordinary experience of the Oaxaca Commune in Mexico, an experience of grass-roots rebellion and self-government that has put forth an alternative model of struggle to the electoralist model of the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática – Party of the Democratic Revolution) and to that of the Zapatistas and their Other Campaign, with their opposition to ‘taking power’ and their indifference or opposition to participation in elections. The Oaxaca uprising of the Spring of 2006 was an urban insurrection in one city, with important resonances elsewhere in the state of Oaxaca. It developed novel and participatory forms of organization, struggle, and self-governance. The Oaxaca rebellion developed ‘assembleist’ forms of direct democracy in the Spring of 2006 in order to organize itself democratically, as the people of Paris did in 1870-1871, and Russian workers did in 1905 and 1917.

The APPO (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca – Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca) became the organ of struggle and self-government of the popular rebellion. The Oaxaca uprising was a working-class revolt with strong support from other sectors. It started as a strike by the militant section 22 of the teachers union (a union that at the national level is corrupt, authoritarian and linked to the federal government). When the state government moved to brutally repress the movement on June 14, 2006, the people of Oaxaca City rose up and drove the state government out of the city. After five months of self-government and resistance, the national government carried out a massive assault on the people of Oaxaca on November 25, 2006. A state of siege was imposed, hundreds were arrested, disappeared, tortured. The movement suffered a great defeat but has not lost the war. It has reappeared publicly and is continuing its battle. This essay examines some of the dynamics and processes of the Oaxaca uprising and commune, its strengths and weaknesses as well as the conjuncture within which it emerged.

The Oaxaca uprising developed into an insurrectionary movement that dreamed

of a new society, but acted with realism in the context of a national situation that was not revolutionary. The popular insurrection asserted dignity, raised consciousness and challenged the rights of capital, but always continued to bargain, or seek to bargain, with an intact national state, though one with a crisis of legitimacy. The pragmatic approach to bargaining (akin to what Hobsbawm once famously called 'collective bargaining by riot') posed its own dilemmas, however. Revolution limited to only one area in a national state would only be tolerated by the national state as long as the government believed it had to bide its time or that it served its tactical or strategic objectives. The political and social breadth of the movement encouraged the government to make limited and vague promises to try to divide the more moderate forces from the more radical. But the government could not or would not respond positively to the key unifying demand, a demand that the movement said was non-negotiable – the removal of a hated governor.

A perennial problem of many local or regional popular movements in Mexico has been the relationship between the local or regional and the national. Movements have been coopted, marginalized or smashed if they remained both local or regional *and* insurgent. Local and regional movements must converge into national movements for the consolidation of gains and the transformation of even the local and regional. Otherwise victories and local/regional transformation will be precarious, dependent on fleeting conjunctures of the national situation and subject to defeat when the national situation changes.

## **MEXICO'S CRISIS OF RULE**

Mexico is in a protracted crisis of rule. The regime is in transition from the old *Estado Nacional Popular* (an authoritarian, one-party regime, but with aspects of a welfare state for some and hope for inclusion for many) to a still ambiguous and contested destination. There is a tension between the partial

democratization of the electoral system and the continuing state-linked authoritarian mechanisms of control over the popular classes. As well, the neoliberal assaults on the lives and rights of ordinary people have produced massive popular discontent. Mexico's crisis is rooted in the general effects of neoliberalism and neoliberal continental integration, the decay of the old mechanisms of domination, the disappointed hopes for a transition to democracy and better living standards, and the continued assault on the quality of jobs, incomes, social rights, and the national patrimony. The concentration of wealth has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. Three-tenths of one per cent of the population control 50 per cent of the tangible wealth of the country, as of 2007.<sup>1</sup> The real wages of the best-paid workers, those with a collective contract, fell by 18 per cent between 1995 and 2007, while the real value of the minimum wage fell by 34 per cent. Only 13 per cent of the Mexican population has a regular salary; the rest are precarious workers. 70 per cent of Mexicans live in cities of over 100,000 that form a constantly growing chain of impoverished ghettos.<sup>2</sup> Starvation wages combined with the neoliberal assault on the countryside continue to push millions of Mexicans northward to the

**In Mexico, neoliberal assaults on the lives and rights of ordinary people have produced massive popular discontent.**

US. State repression and corruption remain unabated.

One in every 700 Mexicans enjoys exorbitant wealth while 80 million Mexicans experience devastating poverty.

The new ruling bloc has not been able to consolidate a new mode of legitimation and has relied more and more on blatant political fraud and state terror to maintain control. This crisis of rule has not produced a revolutionary situation as people have not lost all hope in a quasi-institutional resolution of the crisis and mass-based left projects have continued to be limited by either their reformist goals or the dilemmas of transformatory projects in the context of a still intact national state with a monopoly of coercive power.

The hopes that the replacement of the one-party regime of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), a regime that lasted for over 70 years, would equal a transition to democracy have been dashed by the actions of the Fox administration (2000-2006). Those who advocated strategic voting for the PAN (National Action Party), the traditional party of the Catholic right, to bring down the old political structure of domination failed to see – or did not want to see – that the victory of the right would continue the power of the coalition of the business right and the PRIista neoliberals, but now with the addition of the Catholic right. The neoliberal policies would continue and the de facto alliance of the dominant neoliberal sections of the PRI with the PAN would continue. Massive corruption, constant attacks on working people and peasants, support for the most gangsterist union leaders, were all continued by President Fox of the PAN.

Some of the key goals of this new power bloc (privatization of oil, labour law reform) had been frustrated because of popular pressure and the political stalemate in Congress. The big obstacle to this project of continuity of the right in power was the tremendous popularity of the PRD's mayor of Mexico City, López Obrador. He lived a simple life style, carried out some significant welfare reforms aimed at the poor and senior citizens, and expressed solidarity with the poor while pursuing urban renewal in partnership with capital. The new power bloc and its political operatives were determined to derail any possibility of López Obrador becoming the new president, an outcome which could jeopardize the more radical elements of their agenda as well as possibly subject them to investigation for corruption.

The July 2006 electoral fraud that denied López Obrador the presidency was just the latest attempt to guarantee continuity of their rule. Their first clumsy attempt was the *desafuero*, an attempt to disqualify López Obrador from eligibility to run for president through a petty and spurious legal manoeuvre. When the *desafuero* failed in the face of popular opposition and its transpar-

ent purpose, they resorted to a combination of the normal methods of a bourgeois democracy and those of the old PRI. The duopoly of private TV, Azteca and Televisa, vilified López Obrador as a far leftist, a Chavéz, who would destabilize Mexico. They, in collaboration with the national government,

sought to create a climate of fear and a desire for stability.

**Mexico's new regime plans to deepen neoliberal reforms by changing labour law and privatizing oil and electric power.**

The face of the new presidency of Felipe Calderón is that of the IMF underwritten by fierce repression. The

new Secretary of the Interior (Secretario de Gobernación), Francisco Ramírez Acuña, has been widely condemned for human rights abuses as governor of the state of Jalisco. He took great pride in his tough handling of the anti-corporate globalization protests in Guadalajara on May 28, 2004, a 'handling', it should be noted, which was widely condemned by human rights groups for their brutality, arbitrary detentions and the use of torture. His appointment has been praised by business leaders who have said that disorder and protests in Mexico need to be handled with a 'firm hand'. Certainly, it was Ramírez Acuña who along with Calderón decided (a few days before the latter's official swearing-in on December 1, 2006) to use extreme force, arbitrary arrests and torture in their attempt to smash the Oaxacan popular movement. And the economic ministries went to extreme neoliberals. Agustín Carstens (a 'Chicago boy') resigned a top position at the IMF to become Secretary of the Treasury. Luis Téllez, former Secretary of Energy (1997-2000) and a direct manager of the Carlyle Group since December 2003, was appointed Secretary of Telecommunications. The members of the cabinet in charge of social issues come from the Catholic far right. This is a regime that has announced by words, cabinet appointments and actions its intention to deepen neoliberal reforms, which would include changing labour law and privatizing oil and electric power.



The reaction to the fraud of July 2, 2006 was immediate. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in unprecedented street mobilizations that lasted for weeks. Major parts of the downtown were occupied and temporary tent cities created that became sites of intense political discussion, cultural activities, and communal food preparation. Some of these activities were organized by local political organizations but many by popular grassroots organizations, new and old, neighbourhood and workplace. The López Obrador leadership formed an organization, the CND (Convención Nacional Democrática – National Democratic Convention), which held two massive rallies at the Zócalo (the main plaza of Mexico City), the first of over a million that declared López Obrador president (September 16, 2006) and the second of several hundred thousand in which he was sworn in as ‘legitimate president’ along with the cabinet he had chosen (November 20, 2006).

The López Obrador leadership was optimistic that popular mobilization could effectively pressure key elites to get the electoral tribunal to order a full recount of all votes, which they were confident would show that they had won the election, and that popular pressure would get the old political establishment to acquiesce in the victory of the PRD. But they also felt that they needed to reassure these key elites – as they had when governing Mexico City and throughout the campaign – that they would govern ‘responsibly’, that there would be boundaries to the popular mobilization. López Obrador therefore was very careful to limit the actions of the mass movement to those that would not bring the country to the brink of ungovernability. His approach to the popular uprising in Oaxaca was similarly cautious. In addition to not wanting to do anything to scare key elites, he also did not want to burn his bridges to the PRI, which governed Oaxaca, and whose acquiescence in a PRD presidential victory was viewed as necessary and possible. The PRI held a majority of state governorships – sixteen – and these governors could have created serious problems of governability for him as president. The political leadership of the movement was not seeking to transform the regime; they were fighting for

governmental power.

The only formal organizational structure that developed was the plebiscitarian CND, a convention in name, a rally in practice, controlled from above by López Obrador. The anti-fraud movement had two souls – the elite bargaining, plebiscitarian soul and the popular, participatory soul. Both were real features of the mass anti-fraud movement. That the participatory, associational aspects of the movement dried up cannot be attributed solely to the limits of López Obrador's perspective and goals.

The left was not strong or cohesive enough to effectively promote the more radical social and political ideas of the anti-fraud movement that were submerged within that movement's overarching target of getting a vote-by-vote recount of the presidential election. Nor was it strong or cohesive enough to link this anti-fraud rebellion to the Oaxaca rebellion, which had already begun in June, 2006. The left was sharply divided and not all of it supported an assembleist, struggle-from-below, perspective, as exemplified by the APPO. Some of the old left and leaders of radical organizations and social movements had, over the years, been incorporated into the PRD apparatus and PRD governments of Mexico City and developed more cautious, institutionalist and electoralist perspectives. Others, such as the Zapatista leadership, refused to participate in a movement that they saw as tainted by electoralism and the leadership of ex-PRListas. At a rare moment of mobilization and politicization of the popular classes, the moderate voice of López Obrador was strong and the voices of the left were weak and divided.

The Zapatistas rejected the López Obrador campaign from the start, and also rejected participation in the anti-fraud movement, though they condemned the fraud. They launched their own campaign, the 'Other Campaign', to coincide with the electoral campaign and to present a different approach and a different vision. They made their harshest attacks on the PRD and López Obrador. They expressed scepticism, if not contempt, for political parties and the electoral

process, and tacitly supported abstentionism. They were largely invisible during the campaign and the post-election mobilizations against the fraud. Their campaign consisted of meetings and discussions with communities and movements in various parts of the country, usually away from the areas of major crisis and struggle.

**The PRD remains the most important national expression of the democratic and plebeian revolt against Mexico's authoritarian and neoliberal regime.**

The Zapatistas' political intervention foundered on the question of the relationship between López Obrador and a section of key PRD leaders, on the one

hand, and the mass base of the popular movements that supported López Obrador, on the other. They anticipated, as López Obrador himself did, that he would be elected president and that he would seek to maintain a neoliberal capitalist regime, albeit with a more nationalist and human face, as he likely would have. This was, after all, his program and his track record as Mayor of Mexico City. They failed to see, as López Obrador himself failed to see, that the right in Mexico would not let him win the presidency. The Zapatistas prepared themselves to fight betrayal by the PRD while the right prepared an electoral coup, a sharp deepening of neoliberalism and continental integration, and increased use of the military to control social protest.

Although much of the Zapatista critique of López Obrador and the PRD was merited, they ignored the dynamic and contradictory character of the broader democratic movement of which the PRD was a key hub, but with limited control over the many constituent movements and milieux. While the PRD is an electoral machine that sought to build on electoral support from the popular movements, the broader democratic movement is a giant umbrella under which most of the left, progressive unions and social movements live with significant autonomy and fluid alliances. The PRD remains the most important national ex-

pression of the democratic and plebeian revolt against the authoritarian and neoliberal regime that had its peak moments in 1987-1988 and again in 2006-2007. It has been full of contradictions since its beginnings in 1987-1988. It has mostly been led by top-down, politically moderate dissidents from the old ruling party but based on a nationalist program that challenges the neoliberal integration of Mexico and its resources into the US empire. It has been the repository of hope for a republic of social justice among plebeian forces. The struggles between the more radical, moderate, and conservative elements of the PRD have been continual and have, to date, been contained by their lack of national power. This complex and contradictory character of the PRD cannot be reduced to the politics of some of its key leaders.

**The ideological heterogeneity and diffuseness of the mass base of the PRD and the anti-fraud movement includes strong anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist elements.**

The PRD itself includes layers of former PRIistas but also currents and movements that have long fought the PRI as a party and PRIlismo as a political culture of corruption, opportunism, and repression.

Many elements of the reformist and revolutionary left were founding components of the PRD. And the anti-fraud movement that developed after the elections was even broader and more heterogeneous than the PRD base. The ideological heterogeneity and diffuseness of the mass base of the PRD and the anti-fraud movement includes strong anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist elements. These different moods, hopes, meanings, and currents co-exist in an extremely fluid situation. The challenge for the Zapatistas, as for the left in general, was how to be part of this mass upsurge without being coopted by its moderate leadership. The tensions and contradictions within the PRD, between its top-down and electorally opportunist structure and its mass plebeian base, are as important in understanding its potential as

are the politics of particular compromised leaders. Many of these same tensions – between accommodation, reform and revolution, between caudillistic verticality and horizontal democracy – also exist within the key organizations of the popular movements.

## **THE OAXACA COMMUNE**

The Oaxaca uprising developed in this context of the deepest post-election crisis in Mexico since 1910 – the start of the Mexican Revolution – and slightly more than 12 years after the Zapatista revolt began in 1994, and 20 years after the democratic insurgency that started in 1987. The character of the national crisis gave the Oaxaca uprising impetus and space to grow while at the same time constraining its possibilities. Oaxaca is one of the three poorest states in Mexico and is, by far, the state with the highest percentage of indigenous people, approximately 67 per cent of the 3,700,000 Oaxacans living in Oaxaca. Another 250,000 Oaxacans live in the Mexico City area and the government estimates that at least 300,000 Oaxacans have migrated to the US in the last 15 years. As well, many Oaxacans live and work in the nearby states of Puebla and Veracruz and the agribusiness and maquila states of Sinaloa and Baja California.

The Oaxacan population is composed of a variety of indigenous peoples and has one of the most, if not the most, trans-regionalized and trans-nationalized populations in Mexico. Oaxacans labour not only in Oaxaca but in the Mexico City area, in the agribusiness and maquila zones of the north, and throughout the west coast of the United States. Their communities live in a transnational space, harassed and oppressed by two national governments and their state government. In the US, their undocumented status is increasingly criminalized. In Oaxaca, their social protests and civil participation have been criminalized by the state and national governments. Many Oaxacan communities depend on remittances from the north. And not only remittances but nostalgia and family sentiments flow from the north to the south; stories and experiences and

'lessons' of individual and collective struggle are shared. Oaxacan networks – as other immigrant networks – are conduits of experiences and locations for interpreting and reinterpreting the character and nodal points of the local, national, and global.

Oaxaca is also a pivotal place in the drive to open up the resources of southern Mexico and Central America to exploitation by international capital. Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), proposed early in the Fox administration, proposes to solve the problems of regional poverty and underdevelopment by inserting Mexico's nine southern and southeastern states, as well as the seven countries of Central America, into globalization. But, in fact, these areas have long been inserted into international capitalism through enclave economies that have produced and reproduced poverty and 'backwardness'. The new plan, which has met major popular resistance, is a plan to deepen this integration as well as further open up the resources of the area to capital and to privatize those that are presently public (oil and electric power). The World Bank has had a plan for a number of years for Oaxaca and three of these Mexican states and Central America to foster biodiversity, a plan that many in the region feel is a plan for biopiracy. As well, the plan to develop a fast rail link across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Oaxaca is aimed at facilitating the movement of commodities from Asia to North America and has little to do with the needs of Oaxaca.

Oaxaca has long been a highly politicized state. It is one of the richest states in indigenous traditions, including that of participatory self-government at the community level. The two most important figures of the 19th century in creating modern Mexico were Oaxacans of indigenous origin, one Zapotec, one Mixtec. Benito Juárez, who served five terms from 1858 to 1872, was the most revered president in Mexico history, and led the war of national liberation against the French occupation; and one of his key military leaders in that war, Porfirio Díaz, led the capitalist modernization of Mexico as president and dictator from 1876 to 1910.<sup>3</sup> There is also a long history of popular resistance

to tyranny in Oaxaca. Two of the most important leaders of the anarchist wing of the Mexican Revolution, the Flores Magón brothers, were Oaxacans. And the major democratic insurgency in the railway workers union in 1958 that led to a major national strike – and massive governmental repression – was initiated

**Popular discontents combined with those of the impoverished teachers, with strong organic links to impoverished communities.**

ated by a rank and file movement of railway workers in southern Oaxaca.

There is an overabundance of discontents in Oaxaca: long-term pov-

erty, a result both of traditional exploitation and more recent neoliberal rapaciousness; fraudulent state elections; a history of human rights violations and repression by the state government; the long-term corruption of uninterrupted one-party rule. These discontents had intensified during the first three years of the governorship of Ulises Ruiz (2004-2010), a period of even sharper repression than previously, as well as of deepening divisions and splits within the state and national PRI. Popular discontents combined with those of the impoverished teachers, with strong organic links to impoverished communities as well as to a three-decade long national teachers' insurgency against the authoritarian national union. The splits in the PRI, the intensified repression of Ulises Ruiz, and the ambience of vulnerability of the national regime in the midst of a presidential election campaign, in which it seemed the PRD had a chance of winning, created the context in which the rebellion had the time and space to flourish for a period.

In the earlier periods of relatively stable one-party presidentialist rule, a popular challenge to a state government had little chance of success, as the national ruling party would use whatever force necessary to protect its governor. But now there were many complex cleavages not only between the three national parties but also within the PRI. And this seeming vulnerability of the

national regime and the bitter intra-PRI battles would combine with the deepening historical discontents and the especially crude and brutal character of the government to produce a popular uprising beyond anyone's expectation

The Oaxaca rebellion started out as a strike by Section 22 of the national teachers union, in early May 2006. The teachers of Section 22 had long played the role of organic intellectuals to popular movements while, at the same time, collectively playing the role of a militant union and convenor of broader union and worker alliances. They are a key component of a national alliance of democratic teachers within the authoritarian national union. Their presence in all parts of the state, their links with parents and communities, their inclusion of demands for better schools, supplies and meals for the kids – all this gave them a powerful influence and credibility among the popular classes.

The demands were a mix of demands for improvement in teachers' salaries and demands for financial help for poor schoolchildren. After negotiations completely broke down, the teachers and their allies organized a *plantón* (occupation) of the central plaza and surrounding streets. *Plantones* are a traditional form of protest that often accompany strikes. This *plantón* was larger (35,000 to 60,000 people) and more geographically extensive than usual, but was not otherwise different from what had occurred many times before. The intransigence of the governor in face of the union's demands, his history of repressiveness and contempt towards the patrimony of Oaxaca, led to a rapid politicization of the struggle. The removal of the governor from office came to be a central and non-negotiable demand.

Marches in support of the teachers were frequent and grew in size. On June 2, 80,000 marched in support of the movement; on June 7, 120,000 marched. But, on June 14, the governor sent in the state police to brutally attack the encampments in the pre-dawn hours while the teachers, their children, and their allies, were asleep. The teachers and their supporters fought back. Resi-



dents in the surrounding areas quickly joined the battle on the side of the teachers. And after four or so hours of fighting, the state police were driven out of the center of the city. The governor called for federal intervention but the federal government refused to do anything in these weeks leading up to the July 2 national elections. The movement reinforced its defences in the center of the city, setting up barricades with commandeered commercial and government vehicles, including police cars, as well as appropriating them for the transportation needs of the movement.

**The struggle over radio and television was crucial for the spread and deepening of the popular movement.**

On June 16, two days after the defeat of the police assault, the second mega-march was held in which most of the poor population of the

central valley (Oaxaca City and surrounding areas) participated, a march that overwhelmed Oaxaca City. As well, the teachers union and the popular movements organized the APPO in an assembly held from June 17-21, which declared itself the supreme authority in Oaxaca. The government and the PRI sought to counter with their own march, a march that only drew 20,000. The APPO had the largest march in the history of Oaxaca on June 28, a march to which all seven regions of the state sent contingents in the tens of thousands to join with the poor of the central valley. This march had the overwhelming support of the people of the central valley and all seven regions. The state government had been forced to vacate the city and to go through the motions of governing from remote locations. The APPO ran the city.

The struggle over radio and television was crucial for the spread and deepening of the popular movement. The teachers had set up a radio station, *Radio Plantón*, with an extremely limited range, barely two kilometres. When the government attacked the *plantón* on June 14, it smashed the equipment of

*Radio Plantón.* In response students at the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO) took over the university radio station in support of the rebellion, a station with a much more powerful transmitter. Thus began a struggle over the air waves that would last for the duration of the Oaxaca commune.

**The radio and television stations controlled by the state government, as well as the private media, ignored, misrepresented and vilified the popular movement.**

Throughout the struggle, the radio and television stations controlled by the state government, as well as the private media, ignored, misrepresented and vilified the popular move-

ment. On August 1 women organized a large march in support of APPO, a *marcha de las caserolas*, (banging pots and pans as they marched). Some of the women went to the state television and radio stations to request air time to present the views of the movement as well as to ask the stations to be more truthful. The brusque negative to both requests angered the marchers and they peacefully invaded and took over the stations, stations that could broadcast across the length and breadth of the entire state. From August 1 to August 21, the stations became the voice of the people and the popular movement. Discussions were held about events elsewhere in Mexico and the rest of the world. Ordinary people voiced their views and aired their complaints. When the government destroyed the equipment for the transmission tower of its own stations, various APPO groups invaded 12 commercial radio stations, all but two of which were released back to the owners the next day. The two that the APPO continued to control were used as voices of the movement for several months. The popular movement of Oaxaca broke through this iron curtain of the media oligopoly by peacefully taking over the media, which was made possible by the absence of governmental power in Oaxaca City. The media then became a voice of the people. Media pluralism across class lines temporarily existed in Oaxaca.

Efforts were made over the next months by the teachers and APPO to negotiate a solution with the federal government in relation to the union's demands, the more political demands of the APPO, and the demand for the removal of the governor. The federal government made various attempts to coopt or split the movement, without great success. And though the national government did agree to some demands – generally without following through on fulfilling them – it would not agree to the fundamental demand for the removal of the governor. Thus there was a period of five months in which APPO controlled and ran the city, negotiations with the federal government took place sporadically, the state government was isolated from the state capital, but during which the state government and its para-military squads carried out a campaign of selective terror. There was an ambiguous mix of 'collective bargaining by insurrection', and a dual power situation in one city. The perspective of mobilization-negotiation-mobilization was constant, with the national government viewed as the necessary negotiating partner. The APPO was composed of a great diversity of movements and organizations that ranged from NGOs, unions, neighbourhood associations, indigenous organizations, to newly formed associations such as the barricade committees. Some were not democratic at all and some had been viewed as having compromised relations with this or previous governments. Others were formally democratic but not all of these were very participatory.

But as the masses of Oaxacans erupted in the streets, began to organize to fight back, to seize and run radio and TV stations, to man barricades, to debate and make decisions, to police and organize themselves, the APPO was transformed. The popular barrios joined in the movement and organized themselves; the indigenous communities – already organized – also joined. The original, more vertical, more formal core of union and left organizations was swamped by popular organizations, both new and traditional, giving the movement an energy and a character that overspilled formal organizational boundaries. As the APPO developed into a mass uprising and self-organizing movement, control over it was limited.<sup>4</sup> Luis Hernández Navarro well describes the

heady mixture of movements and organizations that the APPO became: 'The APPO synthesizes the local political culture born of popular assemblies, teachers' unionism, indigenous communalism, municipal self-government, Church community activism, the radical left, regionalism, and the ethnic diversity of the entity. And it expresses, furthermore, the new associational forms created in Oaxaca through the pacific popular uprising: organizations of the poor neighbourhoods of the city of Oaxaca and its surrounding zone, libertarian youth networks and those of the barricades'.<sup>5</sup>

**The APPO became the movement of the vast majority of the people of Oaxaca against the governor and his political machine.**

The APPO became the movement of the vast majority of the people of Oaxaca against the governor and his political machine. It was a multi-class coalition with

proletarianized teachers at its core. It had the support and participation of other sectors of unionized and non-unionized workers, the informal sector, sectors of small business, intellectuals, university professors and students. It was a broad popular alliance within which labouring classes of various kinds played a crucial role. The strength of the APPO was in large part based on the social and political breadth of its support. The movement started with the struggle of teachers who were joined by parents and working people of all kinds. But sections of the middle strata and discontented elements of the PRI and the PAN in Oaxaca also joined the movement; some of them were also motivated by an agenda of democratization, an end of state repression, a desire for social justice, etc, but others were seeking to ride to political power on the back of the mass protest without a previous track record of commitment to the issues of the popular movement. APPO's very breadth thus presented and will continue to present important challenges for and tensions within the movement.

## CONCLUSIONS

The para-revolutionary situation in Oaxaca has to be seen as a type of insurrectionary reformism, combining revolutionary forms of struggle with goals of increasingly radical reforms. This model of struggle has the potential to influence the discourse and imagery of existing and emerging movements seeking to transform Mexico. It provides an alternative to electoral struggle backed by mass pressure against fraud (PRD and López Obrador), and to the path the Zapatistas have chosen since their national march for indigenous rights in 2001. The generalization of the lessons of the forms of struggle and of self-organization ('dual power' within the city of Oaxaca and, to a lesser degree, within the state of Oaxaca) to significant parts of the bases of the anti-fraud movement, to the trade union dissidents, and to the base of the 'Other Campaign', would have a radicalizing impact. But it would be a mistake to see the Oaxaca struggle itself and at this time as the beginning of a revolutionary conjuncture in Mexico. This could develop as neoliberal reforms are deepened and repression continues to be intensified. But it is not that yet.

The López Obrador anti-fraud movement and the APPO remained apart and wary of each other, as did the Zapatistas 'Other Campaign' in relation to both. López Obrador sought to distance himself from semi-insurrectionary mass revolt from below and feared that the APPO would cut a deal with the national government that would grant some change in Oaxaca while, at the same time, helping to legitimate the national government. The APPO did not join the national anti-fraud movement and was willing to negotiate with the outgoing and incoming PANista governments. As well, there were elements in the APPO (PANistas, PRIistas) that did not even support the anti-fraud movement for political reasons, and other elements that were anti-electoralist or suspicious of Obrador's top-down approach. Thus though much of the rank and file of the anti-fraud movement supported the APPO struggle, and much of the APPO base supported the anti-fraud struggle, the two kept their distance from each other. There were symbolic expressions of solidarity but no real

attempt at alliance. And the Zapatistas kept their distance from both. They distanced themselves from the anti-fraud movement because of the character of its political leadership. And while they praised the APPO, they also kept their distance from it.

The fact that the national context is not revolutionary presents the movement with a deep objective dilemma. The APPO was a revolt in one city and one state with resonances throughout Mexico but not with insurrectionary upsurges elsewhere. The national state is, for the moment, intact. Many Mexicans, even those with bitter and growing discontent, still believe there may be a way out of Mexico's deep crisis through some combination of mass protests and electoral activity. Though a large portion of the population feels the president is not legitimate, they do not, in the main, feel that the existing electoral system itself is illegitimate, but rather in need of fundamental reforms. And the relative democratization in congressional and state elections has helped sustain hope that change can come about within the political system, though with the necessity of mass extra-parliamentary pressure. This non-revolutionary context – the coercive power of the state remains intact and the people have not exhausted their hopes in a quasi-institutional process of change – had, of course, a major impact on how the strategy and goals of the APPO developed. The combination of mass insurrectionary action in Oaxaca with bargaining with the national government represented an obvious realism toward the national situation.

But this realism presented its own dilemmas in a national context in which a mass movement was challenging the legitimacy of the president. The 2006 elections to the national Senate and Congress were not in dispute but the legitimacy of the presidential election was being fervently disputed. The anti-fraud movement vowed to use mass action to prevent the fraudulently elected president from taking office. The APPO was pressuring the Senate to remove the governor of Oaxaca, which the Senate had the constitutional power to do, and bargaining with the outgoing and incoming presidents, both of whom were

part and parcel of the process of precluding a presidential electoral victory by the center-left. The attempts to bridge the demands of APPO and the anti-fraud movement were fraught with difficulties and dilemmas. Both were complex, multi-tendenced mass movements with demands for important reforms but the APPO, in its attempt to force out the governor of Oaxaca, was pressuring the Senate and bargaining with the outgoing and incoming presidents. The movements, even had they shared a revolutionary ethos and strategy, would have faced the perennial dilemmas around radical demands in a non-revolutionary context: how to make real gains without either a complete showdown with intact

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state power and, at the same time, how to avoid the cooptation of leaders or sections of the movement. These dilemmas are inherently difficult; they require a clear perspective about power and the national state.

The APPO and the anti-fraud movements were both mass movements based on the labouring classes but they were radically different in their internal structures and dynamics. The APPO, in the main, was a deeply participatory and horizontal movement, although like most Mexican movements, it had *caudillista* elements and potential. The anti-fraud movement was a top-down controlled movement with tremendous popular energies and participation that may have had the potential of spilling beyond the limits of a top-down structure and towards a more horizontal participatory process. These differences, mutual suspicions about goals, and the bargaining situation of the APPO, along with the absence of a political leadership or ethos that could confront the dilemmas and bridge the struggle, made working together difficult. Only the convergence of the various local, regional and national opposition movements into a

national force could transform the situation from one of a deep organic crisis with regionally-segmented revolts to a pre-revolutionary situation. But the government is very well aware of the danger of discontent deepening and spreading. Its response is to carry out an active anticipatory counter-revolution through the increasing use of the military and state terror to control Mexico. The continuing fragmentation of the opposition forces facilitates this.

The Achilles' heel of many popular revolts in Mexico, from that of the original Zapatistas in the 1910s to that of the Zapatistas of the 1990s, has been the failure to realize that radical change at the local and regional levels can only be consolidated on the basis of fundamental change at the national level. A perspective involving national political power is indispensable. Local power – be it the Zapatista communities of present-day Chiapas or the APPO-Oaxaca commune of the spring and summer of 2006 – can only last as long as the national government has reason to let it continue. In isolation from a national movement of resistance, the national government, unless it is itself crumbling or dividing in fundamental ways, can smash it at its will, though it may pay a significant political cost.

Though there is much suspicion and scepticism toward all political parties, Oaxaca's popular movements and the Oaxacan left do not, in general, have an anti-electoralist position, nor do they have a position against assuming governmental power. Local, national and state elections are seen as tools in the struggle for change but not as the whole toolbox. The teachers and the APPO participated in the 2006 national elections by calling for a protest vote against the PRI and the PAN and devoted major energy to getting out the vote and being vigilant against electoral fraud. The protest vote meant, in fact, a vote for the PRD – and the PRD, in fact, won the vote for president in Oaxaca, nine of the eleven congressional seats and both of the senate seats. It was a dramatic sweep in a state where, before the rise of the APPO, the PRI had been expected to deliver the vote for its candidates yet again.



The Oaxacan revolt has combined extra-parliamentary struggle, electoral participation, insurrectionary activity with aspects of a self-governing commune. It has exhibited complex tensions between centralized coordination and ‘spontaneous’ self-organization and activity. It has shown the amazing creative potential of participatory self-organization and rebellion from below. It has also shown the limitations of rebellion in one city, one state, and the dilemmas of rebellion without a national movement. The enemies of the people of Oaxaca are powerful – the PRI state government and the local *caciques* (political bosses), the Mexican national state and bourgeoisie, the US state and global

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capital. But the tenacity, democratic and egalitarian spirit, and combativeness of Oaxacans is powerful. Oaxacans, with few exceptions, know that the state still matters.

The movement, in its diversity and tensions, is groping for a path that would combine electoral and extra-electoral struggle as well as bring together social, political, and economic demands around both indigenous and proletarian issues. It is a model of heroism and possibility that shows that it is mistaken to see the strategic choice as being between aspiring to manage the existing capitalist state apparatus, or ignoring it. This is a false dichotomy. The strategic task is to transform the nature of power through popular insurgency and organizational forms of control from below. This is the only way the people can rule and transform themselves as they transform society. The people of Paris in 1870-1871, the workers of Tsarist Russia in 1905 and 1917, and the people of Oaxaca in 2006, understood this in practice. Marx would express it in words in ‘The Civil War in France’. The Oaxaca Commune has revived the image of democratic insurgency and popular control. When the next upsurge develops in Mexico – as it will, given the relentless neoliberal assault – the images, rhetoric, and experiences of the Oaxaca commune will resonate widely.

## NOTES

1 *El Financiero*, Mexico, 31 May 2007.

2 Gómez Carlos and Vázquez Rivera, *Evolución Demográfica y Potencial de Desarrollo de las Ciudades de México*, México: Consejo de Población, 2006.

3 Porfirio Díaz was president all those years with the exception of 1880-1884 when he remained the power behind the throne. Contrary to current mythology, Evo Morales is not the first indigenous president in Latin America.

4 Gustavo Esteva, 'APPOlogía', *La Jornada*, 18 December 2006.

5 Luis Hernández Navarro, 'La APPO', *La Jornada*, 21 November 2006 (our translation).

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