

# It all began in Chiapas

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Bernard Cassen, director general of le Monde diplomatique and honorary president of Attac, published a book in 2003, claiming to chronicle the origins of the 'altermondialiste' movement. It was entitled 'Tout a commencé a Porto Alegre' Everything began in Porto Alegre. This is not true. If any one place can be said to have given birth to the movement of movements it was the extremely impoverished Mexican state of Chiapas rather than Porto Alegre, one of the most prosperous of the larger municipalities in Brazil.

The first spark of the new 'anti-globalisation' movement flared up on January 1, 1994. On that day, a hitherto unknown guerrilla group, the Zapatista National Liberation Army, (EZLN, in its Spanish acronym) seized seven towns in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The armed skirmishes themselves lasted less than two weeks; the Mexican government poured in troops and the Zapatistas retreated back into the forests.

The government sent in the army, which began to commit the atrocities so familiar to the peasants and indigenous peoples of central and southern America. But the Mexican government soon found that, in a phrase used in Seattle five years later, 'the whole world was watching'. They could not just massacre indigenous villagers with complete political impunity. A wave of protest, first in Mexico and the USA and then across oceans and continents, quickly forced the regime to halt its offensive and enter into negotiations with the insurgents. Meanwhile a stream of communiqué began to flow out of Chiapas.

These insurgent proclamations had a terrific effect on the people of Mexico and the world because they linked their own struggle in Chiapas, for land and indigenous rights, to the struggle against globalisation and world-wide neoliberal policies. They used the worldwide web, personal computers and faxes to spread the message. Countless people, unseen and unknown to them, passed on the message, which spread like ripples in a pool. The effect was electrifying, as well as electronic.

Why had the Zapatistas chosen January 1st? To answer this we have to shift our view far to the North to the White House where, doubtlessly that New Year, extra crates of champagne had been ordered to celebrate the coming into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. This agreement had been bitterly opposed by large sections of the US labor movement, environmentalists, Mexican maize farmers and others. But their efforts to stop it had failed. The agreement created one vast free trade zone, from arctic Canada to the southern borders of Mexico, opening up Mexico's markets to North American products and North American investors and threatening US workers with the migration of 'their' jobs to areas where labour was 'cheap'.

Despite its name, NAFTA was no simple free trade treaty, it was a radical neoliberal project, establishing US corporate power over member states' national and local democracy. Its provisions took precedence over domestic laws - whether they were passed by a congress, a state or a municipal government. Corporations could take any of these elected bodies to secret arbitration tribunals if they considered any of their laws or decisions negatively affected their investments and were in conflict with the NAFTA pro-

market, neoliberal principles. If the corporation won, the ordinary taxpayers of the 'losing' nation or locality had to pay compensation to the billionaires.

NAFTA was, in short, an employers' dream come true, allowing them to undercut wages and weaken labour protection, to abolish labour rights and by-pass environmental regulations. It would allow American multinationals to flood the Mexican market with cheaper goods – both industrial and agricultural. In particular, it threatened the small and poorest farming communities of Mexico with ruin as the products of huge scale US agribusinesses would flood the market with US corn, including GM crops.

The bankers and businessmen, and their tame politicians, had another reason to celebrate 1994. This year was timetabled for final negotiations on a revised free trade regime for the entire world. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) – part of the old post-Second World War – system was to be replaced by a much more powerful and centralised World Trade Organisation (WTO) which would come into effect in 1995.

Nothing could stop the march of the US, European and Japanese multinationals. There was – all academics, journalist and politicians agreed – no alternative?. No one, it seemed, would dare to say no. Then, from the extreme southern frontiers of NAFTA, from Chiapas province in Mexico someone did say NO. A communiqué from the obscure EZLN reached the world's press and spread like wildfire. Its first words were 'Today We Say: Enough is Enough!' – 'Ya Basta!'.

The declaration had been read by the ski-masked Sub-Commandante Insurgente Marcos, from the balcony of the captured municipal palace in the Chiapas capital, San Christobal de las Casas. His words winged their way around the world to millions of personal computers, by-passing the millionaire media, who had to run to catch up.

Unlike other Latin American movements of the past, the Zapatistas claimed not to be seeking a military victory over the Mexican state forces – the seizure of power in Mexico City. Instead, they wanted to encourage the downtrodden, both in Chiapas and in the world at large, to organise and empower themselves, creating what they called 'an intercontinental network of resistance against neoliberalism' – and an 'international of Hope'.

The centrality of Mexico to NAFTA and the internet created a new window of opportunity which Marcos and his companions exploited to the full.

At a time when older forces of resistance and the defence of rights, conditions and wages, communist parties, social democracy, the trade unions, third world populism, were reeling from the neoliberal attacks of the 1980s – initiated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan – new hope and a call to fight back seemed a precious commodity indeed. That is why the Zapatistas' words flew around the world, rapidly creating networks of supporters, especially in the United States, Canada and in southern Europe, particularly in Spain and Italy. The response was most immediate in countries with populist or libertarian traditions (Spanish anarchism and anarchosyndicalism, US radical populism, Italian autonomism and operaism. Indian Maoism)

What was really unique and new was the way the Zapatistas linked their local struggle to a call for a global uprising against neoliberalism and corporate globalisation. It is this that has ensured the Zapatistas a lasting impact and influence. Their ideas made them stand out and look like a new response to a new era.

Sub Commandante Marcos, not an indigenous inhabitant of Chiapas but a 'white' Mexican 'post-Marxist' intellectual, has been the leading voice of the Zapatistas, and articulated a set of ideas that

makes up 'Zapatismo'. It is this that has turned him into an icon and been crucial to the growth of a network of organised supporters in Mexico and abroad.

The Zapatistas did in fact plug into pre-existing e-networks and anti-NAFTA campaigns, environmental groups, anti-debt campaigners and so they had a hearing among thousands of activists around the world, and could communicate with their new followers in real-time. They had, or created, a charismatic, enigmatic figure, Marcos, an eloquent speaker and writer, in a fashionable post-modern style. He rapidly became an icon for a whole movement. A trickle, then a stream, then a river of young activists from the North and Europe began to visit Chiapas, partly to act as monitors to prevent Mexican government repression, partly to learn the language and the message of the new movement.

At the beginning of 1996, the EZLN issued a call for the first Intercontinental Meeting for Humanity and against Neoliberalism. Seven months later, on 27th July, over three thousand young activists, radical union members, peasant leaders, feminists, human rights, nongovernmental organisations, ecologists, intellectuals, and a smattering of political leaders too, from over 40 countries, gathered in La Realidad – a special conference area constructed in the Lacondon forest. This 'first encuentro,' had a tremendous impact, especially in Italy, Spain and the United States. Its 'graduates' set out to found a new movement or, rather, to network a whole series of existing movements.

The words of Subcomandante Marcos, opening the encuentro, went around the world with the simultaneity of the internet:

'On the one side is neoliberalism with all its repressive power and all its machinery of death: on the other side is the human being. In any place in the world, anytime, any man or woman rebels to the point of tearing off the clothes that resignation has woven for them and cynicism has dyed grey. Any man or woman of whatever colour in whatever tongue speaks and says to himself, to herself: Enough is enough! 'Ya Basta!'

The invisible, marginal and oppressed would, through this movement, become visible and empowered. The despised would become respected. Marcos mockingly rejected labels.

'The communists accuse him of being anarchist. Guilty. The anarchists accuse him of being orthodox. Guilty. The reformists accuse him of being an extremist, a radical. Guilty. The radicals accuse him of being reformist. Guilty. The 'historical vanguard' accuse him of appealing to civil society and not to the proletariat. Guilty. The civil society accuses him of disturbing their tranquillity. Guilty.'

Marcos made himself an icon for the whole struggle who himself had no individual identity:

Who is Marcos? Marcos is a gay in San Francisco, a black person in South Africa, Asian in Europe, a Palestinian in Israel, a Jew in Germany, an artist without a gallery or a portfolio, a sexist in the feminist movement, a woman alone in a metro station at 10 p.m. He is every minority who is now beginning to speak and every majority that must shut up and listen. He is every untolerated group searching for a way to speak, their way to speak. Everything that makes power and the good consciences of those in power uncomfortable – this is Marcos.'

The Zapatistas claimed that they were proclaiming a rebellion, an uprising, which rejected a revolution led by a vanguard of professional revolutionaries, whose objective was the taking of power. Their strategy was, they claimed, 'low intensity revolution', one that changes society from the bottom upwards or from the inside out, without taking the centralised power that exists, by eroding or gradually destroying the existing state power.

Supporters who went to the encuentros reported back that the Zapatistas had set up 32 municipalities, rooted in the traditional Indian communities, run by autonomous mass assemblies of the local population. These assemblies, under Zapatista inspiration, had made a conscious attempt to challenge patriarchy by creating organisations run by and for women and proclaimed a Women's Revolutionary Law drawn up by women themselves 'guaranteeing equal rights to men'. All this sounds very fine and tapped into the anarcho-populist prejudices.

But some questions have to be asked;

(a) what are the 'autonomous village assemblies' autonomous of- the EZLN itself? Subcommandante Marcos? If so, how come they do not seem to take any actions or make decisions of their own? What is the autonomy for and in what sense does it differ from how indigenous communities ran themselves before?

But more importantly let us reverse the question:

(b) is the EZLN itself 'autonomous' of these assemblies or is it responsible to them? If not, then to whom, or to what, is the armed wing of the Zapatistas and its political leadership, the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee, answerable?

Everybody and Nobody, as the Subcommandante proclaims himself to be. Marcos is obviously the key figure, despite his repeated denials of being the leader or the Zapatistas being a political organisation. In fact, the CIRC clearly is the leadership of a de facto political party, leaving aside the commanders of what still calls itself an army.

In short, the Zapatistas do what Marxists have always pointed out that the anarchists and left populists do, maintain a party, albeit one whose democratic structures are neither clear nor transparent and which dishonestly conceals these facts. Along with its army, the Zapatistas in fact maintain a political and, indeed, an 'authoritarian' organisation: and one with a leadership which imposes its will on both its followers and its opponents, by force if necessary.

### **The PGA- 'Zapatista International' is launched**

A year later, an encuentro, modelled on the Chiapas one, was held in Spain. The gathering denied that it intended to found a global organisation or adopt a unified strategy, a programme. The participants explicitly limited themselves to discussing how different groups were affected by neoliberalism and how they might coordinate their actions and solidarity and thus increase their powers of resistance.

After a second encuentro, held in Chiapas, in August 1997, some 50 representatives of these varied movements, including indigenous groups from Nigeria and Mexico, and peasants' organisations from India, Brazil, Bolivia, and Indonesia, planned a series of worldwide protests against the new World Trade Organisation, which they saw as the prime symbol of corporate globalisation. So began the coordinated days of action which became a tactical centrepiece for what was increasingly called 'the anticapitalist movement'. To facilitate organizing, the representatives created an ongoing network, which they called Peoples' Global Action Against 'Free' Trade and the WTO, or People's Global Action, for short. (PGA).

The first of the PGA's Global Days of Action took place in late May 1998, coinciding with the WTO's Second Ministerial Conference, held in Geneva. Simultaneous actions took place in 28 countries.

### **Global Days of Action 'PGA, Jubilee 2000, Euromarches**

Simultaneous actions took place in 28 countries. Five hundred thousand people rallied in Hyderabad in

India, to denounce the WTO. In Brazil, an anti-WTO march drew some 50,000 people, including members of the country's Movement of Landless People, Sem Terra.

In Geneva, on the first day of the WTO meeting, 10,000 protested militantly around the venue. The more militant youth broke the windows of a few banks and trashed a McDonalds. The police attacked demonstrators with clubs and tear gas. Actions continued for three more days, whilst the WTO was there.

A 'Third Encounter' called by the EZLN took place in Belem in Brazil in 1999 with 3,000 delegates present. On 18 June 1999, the PGA co-ordinated a 'Global Day of Action Against Financial Centres,' also called a 'Carnival Against Capital?', to coincide with the G8 summit of the major industrial powers being held in Cologne.

This coincided with a day of action by Jubilee 2000. Jubilee was a coalition of churches and NGOs which had decided to use the biblical concept of Jubilee, a time of forgiveness of debts, of freeing of those in debt-bondage. They decided to campaign for a 'forgiveness' of the debts of the most impoverished countries by the start of the year 2000.

Jubilees in the Global South, in fact wanted all the foreign debts cancelled but the highly influential British campaign rejected such a radical proposal as 'impractical'. Jubilee had already mobilised a huge demonstration in 1997, calling for the cancellation of Third World debt. More than 43,000 people from Britain and abroad formed a nine-kilometre chain around the centre of Birmingham where the G7 were meeting.

Another important strand of the movement in Europe was the Euromarches, an initiative of the Fourth International and its various social campaigns. It was headed by a leading militant, Christophe Aguiton, who went on to become an important organiser in Attac. The 1997 Euromarch started from various points in Europe and converged in Amsterdam on June 14th 1997 where an EU summit was due to take place. A similar series of marches coalesced in Cologne in 1999. The Euromarch process called for 'another Europe' and stigmatised neoliberalism as the enemy. It held several multinational conferences, one of which in Florence adopted a declaration, similar to those adopted later by the Social Forums. Clearly the Euromarches and its political inspirer the Fourth International (then the Unified Secretariat) played an important role in laying the foundations of the movement.

If the PGA, Jubilee and Euromarch actions in 1997 and 1998 were large and widespread, J18 was enormous. There were events in well over 100 cities in 41 countries: from Australia to Zimbabwe, from Sweden to South Korea, from Chile to the Czech Republic.

The groups involved were incredibly diverse: environmentalist groups in Zimbabwe, Poland, Israel and Portugal; peasant unions in Indonesia (North Sumatra Peasant Union) and in Senegal, trade unions (including the 1.5 million strong Bangladesh National Garment Workers' Confederation and the Indian Fisherfolk Union); indigenous and popular movements such as the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements in India. (NAPM) and Chikoko, the network of indigenous groups resisting the oil industry in Nigeria; as well as unemployed organisations in France and beyond.

The events which captured the headlines of the world's media took place on J18 in the City of London, a mass protest which escalated into what the media called an 'anti-capitalist riot', a protest that directly inspired the actions in Seattle.

In the USA, the new movement was somewhat slower in coming together. J18 was an important catalyst for the activists. Action took place in eight major cities. The numbers of demonstrators were in the

hundreds rather than the thousands but J 18 probably marks a qualitative leap, the coming into existence of a new worldwide movement made up of youth, peasants and workers, many of whom proudly accepted the name 'anti-capitalist?', used by the press, as a badge of honour.

The PGA pledged itself to a 'clear rejection of the institutions that multinationals and speculators have built to take power away from people' and to 'a confrontational attitude' based on 'a call to nonviolent civil disobedience and the construction of local alternatives by local people'.

In addition, it adopted 'an organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and autonomy.' These methods of struggle and organisation clearly reveal the inspiration of the movement's populist, anarchist and radical ecologist originators as well its infusion with a type of Gandhian mass, non-violent direct action or NVDA.

For all its radical rhetoric, this clearly remains a reformist strategy. A strategy of protest to get reforms and of self-help at a local level. Its advocates, like their Zapatista mentors, renounce the idea of the 'struggle for power?', some because of anarchist prejudices (don't touch the state: all authority corrupts those who hold it!), some from pacifist ones (opposition to violence in principle).

However, it is far from being a parliamentary or electoralist reformism. Rather than capturing state power via a revolution or smashing/abolishing the bourgeois state, as both revolutionary communists and revolutionary anarchists propose (the latter only objecting to a revolutionary government and a transitional period called the dictatorship of the proletariat) this strategy sets out to transform the world from the bottom up, by defending or creating local communities, occupying lands or housing, in short, replacing the state.

It talks not of workers' but 'peoples' control and power over both production and consumption.' It emphasises that, '...capitalism's mischief on nature has to be stopped'. It calls for 'the revival of traditional knowledge systems and traditional technologies, and even the strengthening of traditional local market systems by developing producer-consumer linkages and co-operatives (and developing similar linkages internationally).' It fails totally to see that a market, even one at first dominated by petty producers and traders, will, via competition, regenerate large scale capital. This would require the reconversion of the entire world into small communities of individual or family producers. This outlook reveals that the Marxist characterisation of it as a petty bourgeois, reactionary utopia is not sheer abuse but a scientific class characterisation

It proclaims that 'the only alternative left is for the people to restore for themselves a life with direct democracy' and 'strengthening peoples' power is the manifesto of this new global alliance of peoples' movements.'

This fusing of first world 'third worldism', characterised by romanticisation of indigenous communities and their traditional production and social systems, with peasant and US-style populism and with anarchism (radical and social ecology acting conveniently as the catalyst) requires a heavy degree of ideological blurring of ideas.

Its overall character can be best described as petit-bourgeois populism. It is hostile to class analysis, hostile to the leadership of the working class in struggle, hostile to parties or political formations which fight for power and totally unclear as to what sort of society will replace capitalism. It is anti-capitalism but without socialism and wants the abolition of capitalism without a revolution. In short, its ideal is quite impossible of realisation.

