



Mexican peasants take up arms

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Regional peasant risings in Latin America do not normally make front pages of our newspapers day after day, writes John McKee, but the seizure of the southern Mexican town of San Christobal de las Casas by several hundred armed guerillas on New Year's Day was different.

It happened on the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, linking Mexico, Canada and the United States in a free trade area.

The rebels in the Zapatista National Liberation Army (ELZN) have named themselves after Emiliano Zapata, a peasant leader in the Mexican Revolution, who was instrumental in seizing Mexico City and overthrowing the hated government in 1913. The parallels were sufficiently uncomfortable to send a shudder of fear through the North American bourgeoisie.

The ELZN is made up of indigenous peasants, many of them women. They have declared war on the Mexican government. Armed only with old guns and homemade grenades, they took to the streets of San Christobal and other towns in the Chiapas area of Mexico. They made clear their opposition to NAFTA. One of the leaders said:

"NAFTA is the death certificate for the indigenous people of Mexico."

Their demands are for basic rights, such as food and housing. One rebel even declared that "our thinking is that we have to build socialism".

For President Carlos Salinas de Gortari the explanation of the rebellion was simple. Foreign subversives were at work, from Guatemala and El Salvador, manipulating the local peasants and trying to destroy Mexico and its "advances"!

The real reasons were not hard to find even for the world's press. The state of Chiapas is one of the most poverty stricken areas of Mexico. Thirty per cent of all adults are illiterate. According to national statistics, its education, income per capita, access to electricity and running water is among the lowest of all the states in Mexico.

The population, the majority being indigenous people, descendants of the Maya, are cruelly oppressed. Thousands die each year as a result of hunger, disease and in clashes with the big landowners who are backed by the military.

As in Zapata's day, land hunger is the fundamental cause of this rebellion. The peasants have been driven into small holdings that can no longer sustain their families. Large scale agribusiness offers little employment and the landlords dominate the corrupt state government. When the rebels seized San Christobal the first thing they did was to free over 170 prisoners, many of them peasants imprisoned after clashes over land rights.

The Mexican state has responded by pouring 14,000 troops into the area and used the airforce to indiscriminately bomb and strafe peasant villages. Numbering under 2,000, the poorly armed Zapatistas have been forced back into the jungle. Despite closing whole areas to the press, journalists have already reported seeing numerous bodies, hands tied behind their backs, killed with a single shot to the head. The Salinas government clearly intends to put down the rebellion ruthlessly, fearful of it spreading to other parts of Mexico.

The fear is well founded. The situation in the cities is explosive. The wages of the industrial workforce in Mexico declined by 40% in real terms during the 1980s. The minimum wage set by the state has declined by 58%. Constant

demonstrations by both workers and peasants take place in the capital. Developing this discontent, deepening the mobilisations of the working class and the poor peasants into a mass struggle against the regime is the key to ending misery and poverty in Mexico.

Whilst the Zapatistas have declared their intention of marching on Mexico City, alone they have little chance of posing a real threat to the Salinas government.

On their own they will be smashed. To prevent even more of the peasant insurgents being massacred, Mexico's workers, with support from workers in other countries, must campaign for an immediate end to the repression now.

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